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## Progressive Practices in Public Schools

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# Progressive Practices in Public Schools

*Introduction*

Jonathan Silin & Meredith Moore

*Essays by*

Alisa Algava

Ysaaca Axelrod

Beatrice Fennimore

Abbe Futterman, Dyanthe Spielberg & Cecelia Traugh

Doug Knecht, Nancy Gannon & Carolyn Yaffe

Jill Leibowitz & Corinthia Mirasol-Spath

Christine Leland, Amy Wackerly & Christine Collier

Rachel Seher, Melissa Birnbaum & Alan Cheng

Darrick Smith

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# Now Is the Time

*Jonathan Silin & Meredith Moore*

Schooling has always been a contested terrain that both reflects contemporary politics and social arrangements and offers opportunities for resistance and models of alternative possibilities. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education), waves of critique have emanated from both those who decry the failure of schools to turn out a globally competitive labor force and those who are critical of schools for perpetuating socially unjust practices and outcomes for students. While efforts to remedy these problems have brought with them new resources and policies, they have also resulted in heightened calls for accountability and national standards.

Past issues of the Occasional Paper Series (OP 24, OP 27) have described how teachers' professional lives are circumscribed by high-stakes testing and pre-digested curricula. They also document the ways that students are subjected to narrowly conceived, academically focused programming that leaves little room for personally meaningful learning and socially relevant curriculum. In the current educational environment it is challenging for teachers and administrators to live up to the progressive ideal of the school as responsive to the values and needs of local communities and families. Nor is there space for continuous reflection on practice, including the rigorous collection of qualitative and quantitative data that results in an evolving, socially transformative curriculum.

In an era when intense pressure has been brought to bear on educators at all levels to “fix” education, *Progressive Practices in Public Schools* is designed to shine a light on the programs and pedagogy that are too often hidden from public view. The goal is to highlight what is hopeful by identifying educators who model rich, complex, and compelling alternatives to what is on offer from many contemporary “reformers.”

## A Complicated History

From its inception in the late nineteenth century and flowering during the early decades of the twentieth, the progressive movement has had multiple strands, some emphasizing self-expression and actualization, and others focusing on social critique and change. The majority of progressives sought a balance between maximizing the potential of every student and realizing the power of group learning. The emergent and integrated curriculum they promoted drew on the immediate experiences of students to facilitate learning about the larger world.

Progressive educators wanted to bring the world into the classroom at the same time as they brought their students out of the classroom and into the community. Most importantly, they were committed to public education as a means to achieve social justice by providing opportunities for students to participate in democratic processes and to become activist citizens.

Some progressives—John and Evelyn Dewey, Harold Rugg and Ann Shumaker, Joseph Mayer Rice, Lelia Partridge—are well known. Many others, such as Leonard Covello, whose life is described by Lorenzo Krakowsky in *Occasional Paper 24* (2010), were less prominent on the national scene. Covello, Krakowsky reminds us, spent his 40-year career promoting the welfare of his first-generation students and their families in East Harlem, where he himself grew up. Working in large public high schools, he crafted programs that were culturally reflective of the students’ immigrant backgrounds—at first Italian and Eastern European, later Latino—and that taught them how to become community activists.

Despite the many examples of small, experimental progressive schools within the public system and entire districts that implemented progressive programs (Cremin, 1961; Pignatelli & Pflaum, 1993), there is little doubt that it is the factory/banking model of education that characterizes most public schooling today. The huge size of many districts, bureaucratic sluggishness, battles over centralized control of the schools, and failure of political will all contributed to this outcome. In the 1970s and 1980s progressive education, increasingly identified as a middle-class pedagogy, underwent critical

reviews by both Marxist and race-based scholars. Basil Bernstein (1975), for example, critiqued open classrooms that favor students who come from middle-class families and are able to learn at home the skills necessary for success when choice, initiative, and independence are given primacy. Lisa Delpit (1988) raised questions about how race and culture shaped the experience of children and their families in progressively oriented educational settings.

## **A Real Opening**

These insights into the limits of progressive education when questions of class, race, and culture are taken into account do not detract from the intent of committed educators who aim to realize the twin promise of equity and excellence in public education. Lucy Sprague Mitchell, chairperson of the Bureau of Educational Experiments, later Bank Street College of Education, was clear about how she hoped the work pursued at its laboratory school would impact public education. In 1919 she commented in her annual report:

We think of all our work ultimately in relation to public education. We wish to keep constantly in mind and to be ready to attack whenever there seems to be a real opening those unresolved social and administrative problems of the public schools which will need attacking before anything we may work out in our laboratory school can be made effective. (Antler, p. 283)

We want to suggest that the “real opening” is now. The rising resistance of families, educators, and policymakers to the hard-edged accountability movement tell us that there is support for re-visioning public education. This is epitomized by the growing “opt-out” movement, in which parents around the United States, with the support of many educators, are refusing to let their children participate in state tests. In New York State in 2014-2015, 20 percent of eligible students opted out of standardized testing (Ujifusa, 2016). The December 2015 passage of The Every Student Succeeds Act, in place of No Child Left Behind, suggests that policy may also be reversing course. Redefining the federal government’s role in elementary and secondary education, the law shifts power back to states and school districts, providing an opportunity to rethink what it means to be accountable.

In addition, ongoing developments in neurobiology support many of the basic tenets of progressivism. Neuroimaging technologies reveal that learning occurs as the brain changes, forming new neural networks; these neural networks are strengthened through repeated opportunities for practice, with support, over time (Fischer, 2009). Here is “scientific” evidence for active

learning processes, which engage children in making connections between their own experiences, classroom-based experience, and the larger world. Likewise, work in neuroscience on the impact of social factors on learning (Cozolino, 2013) lends weight to progressives' argument for the power of group learning.

## **Nine Essays that Show the Way**

Confirmation of the current enthusiasm for re-visioning progressive education arrived in our inboxes this fall when we received more submissions for this issue than for any other in the journal's 17-year history. From these we have selected a range of essays that reflect pre-kindergarten through high-school settings; focus on individual classrooms, entire schools and school districts; and attend to matters of pedagogy and curriculum building or to working within the constraints of the contemporary moment.

Three of the essays showcase child-centered public schools and present twenty-first century embodiments of progressive principles laid out more than a century ago. Mirasol-Spath and Leibowitz explore the benefits of play for students and teachers alike in a New York City elementary school that provides students with time to explore their interests through long-term projects of their choosing. Seher, Cheng, and Birnbaum paint a portrait of another school with experiential learning at its core; at City-As-School in New York City, internships take the place of many classroom-based courses. "The Center for Inquiry: Anatomy of a Successful Progressive School" transports us to Indianapolis, Indiana, where authors Leland, Wackerly, and Collier were part of the original cohort of teachers and university faculty who founded a progressive magnet school. Premised on inquiry-based teaching and learning, the Center for Inquiry has grown from one to four schools.

Answering Delpit's concerns, a second group of essays addresses the ways that progressive education in public schools has shifted and must continue to shift to meet the needs of America's increasingly diverse student population. In "Beyond Child-Centered Constructivism," Algava argues that twentieth-century constructivist pedagogies are not sufficient to fulfill progressive education's inherently political, activist and democratic potential. She calls for a culturally sustaining progressive pedagogy that critically engages questions of power with both children and teachers.

Fennimore confronts the deficit-based talk prevalent in many schools serving marginalized students in "Say that the River Turns." She argues that teaching for social justice begins by replacing deficit-based talk with clearly articulated intentions that subsequently transform into actions. Echoing



the theme of the power of language, Smith summarizes efforts to transform the negative and disrespectful culture at a small California high school with a racially diverse student population. Here a humanizing approach to discipline, rooted in an affirmation of students and their families, and entailing an alignment of school and family values with the school's mission, has been successful. Finally, incorporating data from an ethnographic case study of a bilingual (Spanish/English) Head Start program serving the children of Dominican and Mexican immigrants, Axelrod explores the tensions in parents', teachers', and administrators' beliefs about language use and the role of play.

Balancing these essays on classroom life, our final two essays focus on administrative practices that support progressive education. In "Holding Space for Progressive Practices," elementary principals Futterman and Spielberg and Bank Street dean Traugh use a descriptive review process to share their methods for maintaining educational spaces that are grounded in progressive values, in the face of conflicting mandates from the district or the state. In a provocative counterpoint, Knecht, Gannon, and Yaffe, former New York Department of Education administrators, describe their work adding a quality review process to the accountability system for city schools. Positing that the quality review is itself a progressive process, they argue that it can help schools to focus more on the lived experiences of their students and less on high stakes moments.

Together these essays tell us that only through a shared commitment of families, teachers and administrators can progressive practices flourish in public schools. They also tell us that success requires a combination of hard work in the classroom and savvy political strategizing in the larger systems, along with a deep understanding of the foundational tenets of progressivism and a willingness to reimagine how best to realize them in the twenty-first century. We hope these essays will inspire you as they have inspired us to continue advocating for more just, engaging, and child-friendly classrooms for all children.

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# Reenvisioning the Classroom: Making Time for Students and Teachers to Play

*Jill Leibowitz & Corinthia Mirasol-Spath*

*Pure play is one of the main bases of civilization*  
— Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*

## Reflections on Project Time

Central Park East 1 Elementary (CPE1), located in the East Harlem neighborhood of New York City, is a small, diverse, and progressive public school with mixed-age classrooms. As part of CPE1's philosophy and curriculum, Project Time (sometimes called Work Time) is a nonnegotiable part of every school day. Children work on projects of their choosing, individually or in small groups. The authors both have strong connections to CPE1. Jill is a clinical psychologist who has been a parent at CPE1 since her oldest son was in Pre-K. She currently has a daughter in the third grade. Corinthia was a 4th/5th grade teacher at CPE1 for eight years, where she taught Jill's son for two years. As our relationship developed, we had many conversations around our educational philosophies. It was through these discussions that we came to think about play and its place in the classroom, and in particular how play through Project Time allows both students and teachers the space and time to play in the classroom together and even to be playful within themselves.

Project Time provides a space for both parties involved to play with the constant negotiation and renegotiation of roles occurring within the classroom between the child and her- or himself, child and teacher, teacher and self, and child and other children. These negotiations often occur simultaneously around hands-on opportunities to make choices, explore materials and ideas that incorporate a range of disciplines, self-reflect, plan and manage time, negotiate with others and their ideas, and make sense of those ideas in conjunction with or in contrast to one's own ideas and ways of seeing the world (for a more detailed description of how to implement project-based learning, see Katz, Chard, & Kogan, 2014).

**Jill:** *The Lego-Market Share in my daughter's 2nd/3rd grade class was impressive. After an in-depth study of markets within the community, the children spent weeks making an immense 24-hour grocery store. There were delivery trucks, aisles filled with items, and even a working conveyor belt to get products from the trucks into the store! As the*

*children spoke about their contributions, I could see the detail, creativity, and collaboration they put into their work. I marveled at the patience that was required after initial plans fell through.*



*I listened as one child discussed the huge army of security guards he and his peers had made. There were several soldiers with guns guarding the front of the store. It seemed this group of boys spent hours of class time playing with Legos, making the same army-style creations they would make if they were playing at home. The parent in me began to think that this work was not very academic or educational.*

*Then it was my daughter's turn to describe her contributions. Sadie entered CPE1 an extremely shy pre-K student, speaking only to immediate family members and a few other people when necessary. And now there she was, speaking with confidence and pride in front of students and parents!*

*As I reflected on the experience of the children, my own child included, the psychologist in me thought about how they had been given the opportunity to play with and explore feelings of strength vs. weakness, power vs. vulnerability, and safety vs. danger and to deal with their fears and uncertainties around these big experiences. I considered the many children (from independent and public schools) I work with who do not feel safe at school, afraid to make mistakes and get bad grades. They have little time in their highly scheduled, busy lives to play imaginatively. They have few outlets to playfully express aggression and grapple with fear and vulnerability. I see children who, instead of developing confidence, are dominated by anger and fear. I suddenly felt a deep appreciation for the type of learning and education my children were receiving. In addition to teaching academics, the safe and playful walls of their school also fostered*

*the children's socioemotional development, which is critically important and, as reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics, actually enhances the ability to learn (Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012).*

**Corinthia:** *Project Time is that invitation, as Jill said, “to play imaginatively”— with materials, ideas, and others. It is a time and space when we help children and even ourselves as teachers to take a lead in exploring new scripts and contexts and support each other in embracing these invitations. Last year, one of my students, Justin,<sup>1</sup> decided to study the history of a sport and present his findings at the Search Project Museum. He wanted to study each team: their statistics, performances, game history, plays, and comebacks. Although I knew nothing about this sport, I knew the enormity of what he was suggesting.*

*Earlier in the year, Justin had been involved in several incomplete projects, each being replaced by the next whenever he became stuck. The challenge of working through these projects, even with support, was daunting. It was easier to start anew. Knowing what had stopped him in his previous projects, I now feared his latest proposal. I felt like I had to counsel him out of pursuing his idea because I feared its immensity. I tried to convince him of what I knew, even though I often consider how present I should be in students' projects, given that those are their projects, not mine. Choice is so much a part of Project Time. It's not about indulging students' every whim, but rather about considering which role(s) I am going to play in the moment: observer, stage manager, mediator, player, scribe, assessor, communicator, or planner (Jones & Reynolds, 2011) and how to move between them in the context of what emerges.*

*In retrospect, I saw that my anxiety about Justin's sports project had to do with my knowledge of the limited amount of time we had until June, and that people generally expect a presentation to look a certain way: finished. Polished. I became fixated on this until a colleague of mine said, “Perhaps narrowing it down is the project.” And there it was; more than the content, that had been the project all along. Until then, I hadn't considered that my own fears around visibility (my student's and my own) and time (the perceived lack of time) were dictating the choices I was making and preventing me from seeing both the potential of our work together and how the value of that work was based on a limited notion of what could be deemed academic.*

## **Providing Time and Space for Play in the Classroom**

As adults we make subtle and not so subtle statements to children about what parts of their identity we do or do not accept. In thinking back to Justin, we are struck by Winnicott's (1971) statement that when he, as an adult, makes a “dogmatic” intervention, it “leaves the child with only two alternatives, an *acceptance* of what I have said as propaganda or a *rejection* of the interpretation and of

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1      A pseudonym.



me and of the whole set-up” (p. 10). What results is a protection of the self. Children have to own their work; otherwise, they’re doing someone else’s.

Project Time allows children to build that sense of agency, with support. It is a time and space when students learn to trust their own instincts, identify their limits, and consider their potential. However, they can only truly identify their limits and potential if given the time and space to play—to explore, to do, to succeed, and even to fail. To do that alongside an adult who remains engaged but at the same time knows when to back off provides just enough of a sense of security for this exciting and sometimes scary endeavor. Jones and Reynolds (2011) outline developmental stages of play in early childhood: exploration, play, investigation, and dialogue. Project Time repeatedly engages us in each of these stages of play, as each project either takes on a new script or revises and builds upon an old one.

**Corinthia:** *Narrowing down an idea was new for Justin. In my role of observer, I noticed Justin was a researcher. He didn’t lack initiative. Left to his own devices, he would have spent hours researching. The more he found, the more he wanted to delve into this topic. I also observed how he approached this work with a certain coolness, which was in such contrast to my own approach. While it was partly a reflection of his work style and personality, I also realized that it was a natural result of not having had previous experience presenting at the Search Project Museum. Having experienced several iterations of this work, I was coming from a completely different vantage point. In light of this, why he wanted to tack on more work even though the museum was now only a few weeks away made sense.*

*For Justin, doing a project he was interested in within a time constraint was something yet to be explored. As his teacher, I had to stop interrupting his play and instead be a stage manager. I had to provide a space for him to feel what all this meant inside his mind and body and help him find the language for this new experience. He was, in a sense, in the early developmental play stage of exploration (Jones & Reynolds, 2011). It wasn’t that Justin hadn’t done this before, but rather that he was learning to play all over again, while engaging in a new script. It required me to be a planner and sit alongside him to help him negotiate between what he wanted to keep doing, what was required, and what could actually be accomplished in a set amount of time. Using a calendar, we outlined what would need to be done and how much time it would take him to do it and then set reasonable conditions.*

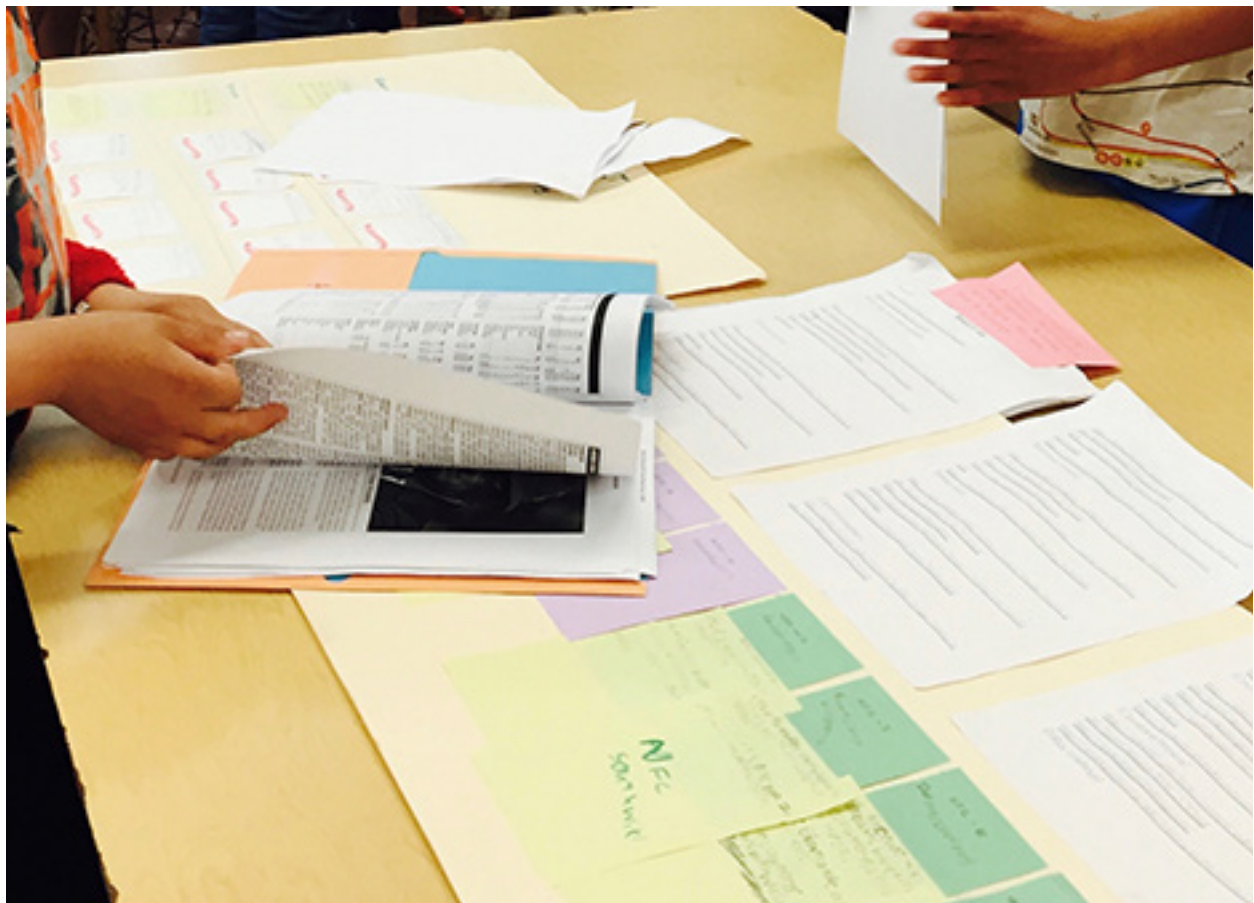
*The other big task for Justin was to organize his research. Although he had practically memorized everything he’d read, we had to find a way to compile it so that it would be visible to others attending the museum. According to Jones and Reynolds (2011), the mark of play, their second developmental play stage, is that in the midst of the experience, the play moves toward finding ways to represent that experience. Representation “makes possible both looking back and looking ahead, rather than just living in the moment; and communication removed in both place and time, rather than*

*only face-to-face” (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p.10). Again, although Justin had previous experiences of moving beyond direct encounter to representation, within this project he was experiencing this transition anew.*

*We spent the next few weeks experimenting—playing with ways to record his work:*

- Gathering a list of websites
- Choosing 1–2 resources on each topic
- Deciding how many and which articles needed to be printed
- Writing important information on Post-its
- Placing Post-its on poster board and arranging them in a web that consisted of main headings, subheadings, and related information

*With the Post-its, I initially played the roles of scribe and planner to model possible ways for Justin to organize his ideas. Having tried other kinds of organizers early on, we found that the choice to use Post-its yielded many advantages. It allowed Justin to investigate through concrete means the physical movement of his ideas without having to rewrite them each time. While he was familiar with computers and we might have been able to accomplish the same thing using the cut-and-paste function, seeing his work arranged on a poster allowed Justin to literally see (and play with) the overall picture of what it meant to organize his thoughts. At the Project Museum, we laid out his work across the table to try to capture this. We also practiced different ways of keeping all this information together (taping, stapling, paper-clipping, etc.) and how to store it so that he could use it to reference and more readily communicate his work and ideas.*





*Upon closer inspection, I could see that the arranging and rearranging Justin was doing was evidence of a natural progression toward investigation, Jones and Reynolds's (2011) third developmental stage of play, where the child becomes an "intentional learner, capable of product—as well as process... [where] they can be guided to set goals for themselves and evaluate their learning, and to design how they will improve or build on this learning at the next opportunity" (p. 12). This move also marked a simultaneous entry of teacher and student into the roles of assessor and communicator. I was assessing both Justin's work and how I was working/playing with Justin as I navigated how to help him communicate his work to the wider school community, and Justin began to assess his own process for communicating his work to others.*

*Looking back, I now realize that I had also entered into the role of player. I was learning how to play with Justin. I too had a new script to learn. And I was having fun doing it! Huizinga (1955) described play as leisure which does not by any means prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome "only" feeling. Any game can at any time wholly run away with the players. (p. 8)*

The point was no longer about getting Justin to the next stage by a set time, even though that did end up happening.

*The dialogue we were having together and perhaps even with our own selves is what I strive to have with each child. While the play at Project Time varies for each child and/or each group, Project Time is a type of reenactment of play's developmental trajectory. Each project, each choice, moves us toward playing with our ideas and making them happen in a community of learners.*

Our responsibility as educators is to be a "child-watcher" who "observes the child pedagogically... who guards and keeps in view the total existence of the developing child" (van Manen, 2002, p. 26). And yet, in today's competitive academic climate of high-stakes standardized testing, does a teacher feel safe enough to do that? To allow students the time and space to play—to go through their own process, when she knows that the final result might appear to an outside observer to be a failure and that others (students, parents, colleagues, principals, departments of education) might judge her and her student negatively? As Winnicott (1971/2005, p. 60) noted, "Children play more easily when the other person is able and free to be playful." But in today's educational climate, are teachers able and free to be playful with their students? And are they able and free to be playful within themselves?

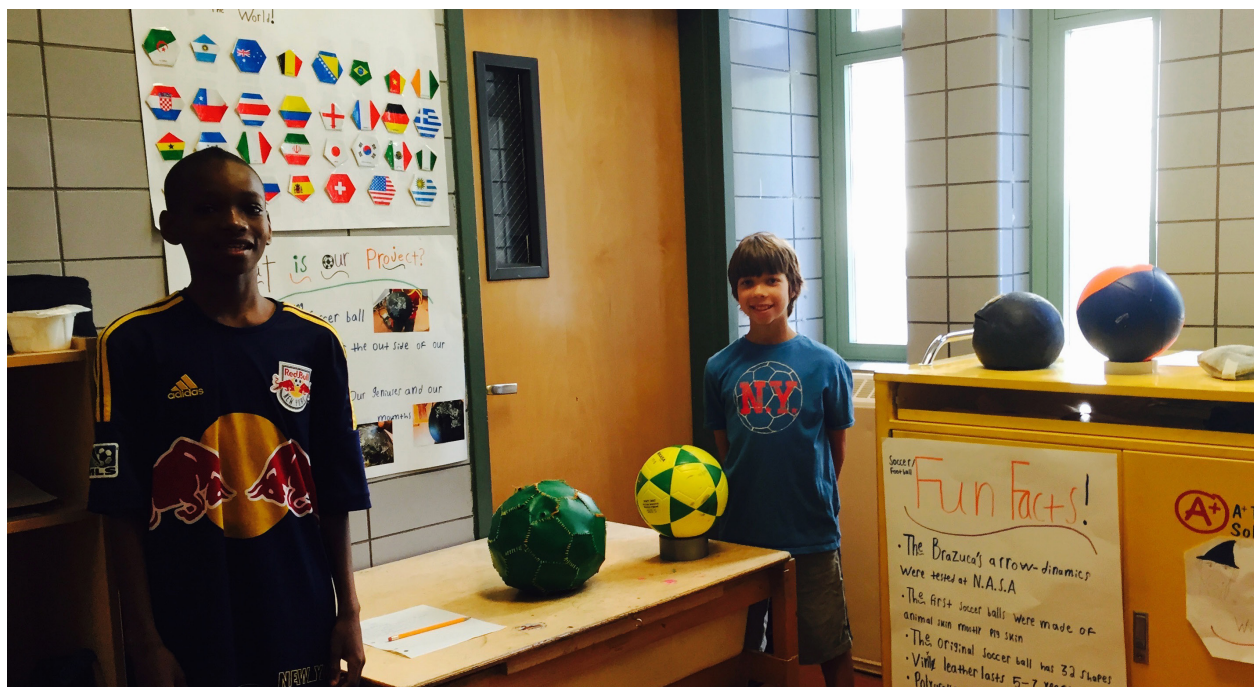
**Jill:** *It's fascinating to hear this backstory, because Justin's project stood out to me. At first glance it appeared to be completed in haste and I wondered what he learned. As a visitor to the museum, I had no idea of what actually went into this project. I can only imagine your anxiety about how others might judge both of you. I certainly made unfair judgments about the overall project without knowing anything about what actually went into it.*

## Discovering the Self Through Play

According to Erikson (1950/1993), play is the ground on which an “early source of a sense of identity” (p. 237) is built. He states, “The playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery... the child’s play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experimenting and planning” (Erickson, 1950/1993, p. 222). Winnicott (1971/2005) shares this view: “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (p. 72–73). When we don’t provide time or space to play, projections and pretensions, instead of the questions, insights, and intuitions of the students and teachers, drive our classrooms. This can effectively take away a child’s ability to play with reality and to develop, to its fullest potential, a sense of self.

Unfortunately, this time and space is not given much attention in today’s educational hierarchy. The play in Project Time is different from the play that occurs during the periods we usually earmark for it in the school day, such as recess, gym, and dance. And even the opportunities for those are increasingly rare in schools across the country (Koplow, 2014; Miller & Almon, 2009; Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012). Research has shown that to boost standardized assessment scores, children as young as those in preschool and kindergarten are being taught scripted reading and math curriculums as well as test-prep lessons and are spending increasingly less time playing in activities such as art, sand and water tables, blocks, science, imaginative play, and recess (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2009). Yet given that creativity and identity are developmental processes that continue throughout the life span, even adolescents and adults require play to develop “long-term life skills and a rewarding sense of fulfillment—and yes, performance—[which] are more the by-product of play-related activities than forced performance” (Brown, 2009, p. 111). Despite our knowledge that “to control what is outside one has to *do* things, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 55), current educational practice increasingly takes this time away by focusing solely on indicators of achievement: grades, test scores, and even teacher evaluations.

**Jill:** *The projects in my son's Project Museum were centered around the theme of genius. My son's genius was athleticism. He spent the year researching and making a soccer ball with a partner. At times, I felt disappointed as he spent much of Project Time in the hallway kicking around a soccer ball as a means of studying it (engaging in exploration and play). I thought, "Seriously? This is how you spend Project Time?" My parent-self was worried my son wasn't learning enough and that he'd fall behind his peers from other schools once in middle school. Yet my more objective psychologist-self trusted that real learning was occurring, even if it wasn't immediately visible. And sure enough, by year's end, my son and his partner had spent hours researching the components of a ball and the cost-effectiveness of the materials, undertaking the tedious process of sewing the ball (engaging in investigation), and ultimately, tolerating the frustration of not being able to make a ball as perfect as the ones they purchase.*



*Some children at the museum had not accomplished their initial goals. Yet I was impressed by their creativity, perseverance, and collaboration. Some students built, while others wrote. Some took on grand projects that ultimately needed to be modified and made more manageable. One student said, "I learned I have to organize my materials and notes, otherwise, I can't find anything." Another said, "I learned I have to take notes on all my data. Even though I think I'll remember, I don't!" Many students acknowledged asking others (peers, teachers, parents of other students) for help. As I dialogued with them, I witnessed the pride and ownership students felt as they spoke, even as they also acknowledged the flaws and imperfections of their work. I recalled youngsters I'd worked with in my therapy practice who lacked pride in their work (despite getting A's) because their parents and teachers had supplied so much input that the students no longer felt a sense of ownership.*

*I realized that while it was valued, the final product was secondary. The learning was in the process. As the students came to know themselves as thinkers, doers, and community members, they were striving to develop a sense of self, even when the final product was, in one child's words, an "epic fail."*

Vygotsky (as cited in Berk and Winsler, 1995) points out that "in play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior...as though he were a head taller than himself" (p. 52). Play also makes room for all people to experiment with themselves at any age and in a variety of contexts, both real and imagined. Jones and Reynolds (2011) point out that

In their play, children invent the world for themselves and create a place for themselves in it. They are re-creating their pasts and imagining their futures while grounding themselves in the reality and fantasy of their lives here and now. (p.133)

In play, children are engaged in the work of the world. Unfortunately, in most schools play does not seem part of the agenda. Gray (2013) coined the term "play deficit," signaling the push "toward more school, more testing, more adult direction of children, and less opportunity for free play" (para. 5; see also Chudacoff, 2007). Given the importance of play and its links to cognitive performance, including (but not limited to) memory, learning, motivation, initiation, self-regulation, problem-solving, innovation, and creativity (Brown, 2009) why is it that schools prioritize obtaining factual knowledge and test-taking skills at the expense of play?

## **Playing with the Boundaries of Play at School**

So what if we tried something different? What if we provided a space like Project Time to make room for this type of play? Project Time is a fluid space that is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed—played with—by students and teachers based on their needs at any given moment. And for those of us willing to play with that idea and consider offering a space like this in our classrooms, what if in the same way that we provide our children the space to play, we also use Project Time as a vehicle to play ourselves?

Brown (2009) states that "new discoveries and learning come when one is open to serendipity, when one welcomes novelties and anomalies, and then tries to incorporate those outlying results into the broader field of knowledge" (p. 142). We acknowledge that we have been fortunate at CPE1, which, while subject to all sorts of outside pressures, has also remained a protected learning space for over 40 years. But if we can push even further, could Project Time and/or project-based learning

possibly allow us to reenvision our practice as educators through the lens of play—to play with reshaping the boundaries and ideas of what is/can be considered valid and valued work in school? And can engaging in the play that happens during Project Time—the same play we ask our students to engage in—bring us to another conversation, one about how to reconstruct the school day so everything we do encompasses a form of play?

The fluidity of a space like Project Time lends itself well to any aspect of the school day—for example, to incorporating playful, project-based learning into read alouds, the social studies curriculum, or both, as in the following exchange:

**Corinthia:** *That same year, our read aloud, 'The Red Pencil, was about a young girl, Amira, in search of hope in Darfur. Prior to reading it, we researched the situation in the Sudan. After hearing from several groups, one girl came to me completely despondent. "Is the whole world just motivated by money?"*

*I took a deep breath before answering her. Before I spoke, she said, "Amira's world is not familiar to me." I could see worry lines forming on her forehead.*

*Finally, I spoke, "Yes. Sometimes the world is motivated by money. But," I paused, "it doesn't have to be. You could try to change the conversation."*

*I could see her playing with that idea. "I can change the conversation."*

Anything—ideas, materials, people, and even time and space, can be played with. Such play might offer us a way to transform ourselves and think more expansively. According to Brown (2009):

Play, by its very nature, is a little anarchic. It is about stepping outside of normal life and breaking normal patterns. It is about bending rules of thought, action, and behavior... Bending rules and pushing through limits should happen within the realm of play. They aren't the dark side of play—they are the essence of play. (p. 193)

When we stop and ask ourselves to make room for play in the school day for our students and ourselves through Project Time, or anytime for that matter, we too are playing. And with that said... anyone wanna play along?



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# City-As-School: Internship-based Learning in New York City Public Schools

*Rachel Seher, Melissa Birnbaum & Alan Cheng*

This article presents a case study of the internship program at City-As-School, a public high school founded in New York City in 1972 to foster experiential learning. The case study is constructed using the authors' practical knowledge as members of the school community, a transcript of a recent student graduation speech, and interviews with alumni. It is informed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) concept of portraiture, an approach to "inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art" (p. xv).

The authors acknowledge our bias. As members of the school's leadership team, we believe in the power of experiential learning and identify as progressive, public school educators. We believe that our school offers young people a unique and valuable educational experience that few other public schools do. We also aim to apply both an empathetic and a critical lens to the internship program at City-As-School in order to reveal its "essential features" and "rough edges" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 6). We seek to apply a "discerning gaze" to the internship program in order to reveal nuances and complexities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 6). Indeed, while the case study reveals that City-As-School's internship program has been transformative for many students, it also highlights internal and external challenges that threaten to compromise the program's Deweyan nature.

## Historical & Theoretical Context

The notion of experience has been central to City-As-School from the start. The school was created during a period of administrative decentralization in New York City public schools. Fred Koury and Rick Safran were chosen by the then Board of Education to serve as the founding principal and assistant principal, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Both were "deep believers in external education," and the planning team, which included teachers and students in addition to Koury and Safran, drew on School

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<sup>1</sup> When New York City Mayor Bloomberg secured control over the city school system through the state legislature in 2002, he changed the name of the agency from the Board of Education to the Department of Education to indicate that it is a mayoral agency.

Without Walls prototypes that garnered national attention for breaking from traditional approaches to education and situating learning in the surrounding community.<sup>2</sup>

Several of the early planning documents deemed City-As-School to be New York City's School Without Walls. The original call for student planners expanded on this, inviting prospective students to "see the city as your curriculum" and "imagine yourself accredited as a reporter to a local newspaper... as a production-assistant intern at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in Lincoln Center," or as "an intern at a labor union headquarters or a congressman's Manhattan office."

"New York City," the call stated, "is filled with outstanding possibilities for learning—experiences which can be intellectually rigorous, educationally sound, and able to be measured." Most of the first students left their former high schools for their twelfth-grade year, and City-As-School served as an alternative route to earning a high-school diploma for approximately 80 students. No traditional classes were held at this "experimental high school," and students attended internships every day (New York Times, 1973, p. 37).

City-As-School and other School Without Walls models were part of the progressive reform movement in education that flourished in New York City and nationally from the 1970s through the early 1990s. Central Park East was founded in 1974 by the nationally recognized educator Deborah Meier and ten years later, the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national network of progressive schools, was formed under the leadership of TheodoreSizer, a professor and later chair of the education department at Brown University. The Coalition, which expanded to include hundreds of schools, stood for ten common principles, including "personalization," "student as worker, teacher as coach," and "demonstration of mastery" (Coalition of Essential Schools). While City-As-School was not a formal member of the Coalition until recently, it aimed to actualize similar principles.

City-As-School was an early member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which was formed in 1997. The Consortium currently consists of twenty-seven high schools, all of which have a standardized-testing waiver. Students in Consortium schools graduate by presenting Performance-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs) in the four core subject areas—English, Math, Science, and Social Studies—that are assessed using common rubrics aligned to state Regents standards. Graduates of Consortium Schools receive a New York State Regents Endorsed diploma.

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2 The models included the Parkway Program in Philadelphia, Metro High School in Chicago, the School Without Walls in Rochester, and the St. Paul Open School in St. Paul (Progress Report 1, 1972, Table of Contents; Progress Report 2, 1973, p. 3).

What is unique to City-As-School, even among Consortium schools, is the extent to which learning takes place outside the schoolhouse. City-As-School is also unique among Consortium schools in that it is one of eight “transfer” schools within the network.<sup>3</sup> Young people transfer to City-As-School after attending at least one other high school and sometimes as many as four or five. Some come from competitive selective schools, others from so-called failing schools that the Department of Education is phasing out or closing, and still others from schools that did not tap into their strengths and interests or meet their needs. What most City-As-School students have in common is a previous disengagement from school reflected in lateness, absenteeism, poor academic performance, or disruptive classroom behavior.

While City-As-School has grown to serve approximately 600 youth between the ages of 17 and 21, experiential learning is still at its core.<sup>4</sup> The centrality of internships runs throughout the current visioning and promotional materials. A frequently used single-page document reads:

Many students who come to City-As-School (CAS) were struggling in their former schools, and we believe that continued struggling will not change behavior positively....Through internships that span the ordinary to the extraordinary, CAS students begin again to develop a keen interest in their own lives, education, and communities.

Experiential learning is seen as a way of re-engaging young people in education and re-connecting them with themselves, the adult world and our society.

In its dual focus on the child as the center of the learning process and experience as the primary mode of learning, City-As-School embodies two key progressive ideals established by Dewey and his contemporaries at the turn of the twentieth century. For City-As-School, as for Dewey (1902/2010):

The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. His (*sic*) development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character, is more than subject-matter. Not knowledge or information, but self realization is the goal. (p. 9)

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3 “Transfer school” is the term used by the New York City Department of Education to denote “full-time high schools designed to re-engage students who have dropped out or who have fallen behind in credits.”

4 See the school website for additional demographic information: [www.cityas.org](http://www.cityas.org)

Furthermore, learning that begins from the child is active and organic rather than externally imposed. Dewey captured this notion, when he wrote:

Subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind. It involves organic assimilation starting from within. Literally, we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning.  
(p. 9)

Dewey identified experience as the vehicle through which active, child-centered learning transpires. He characterized traditional schools as deadening in their imposition of the curriculum on the child, stating, “The source of whatever is dead, mechanical and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum” (p. 9). He advocated instead for learning grounded in the experiences of the child:

From the side of the child, it is a question of seeing how his experience already contains within itself elements—facts and truths—just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study.... Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made itself, outside of the child’s experience... It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child’s present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies (p. 10-11).

For Dewey, the ideal was active learning through organic experience that extended outward and eventually connected to academic subject matter. City-As-School embodies this key tenet of progressive education.

The City-As-School model has morphed over the years so that it now includes classes based in the school building. While classes and internships are separate learning experiences, the classes mirror the internships in terms of their pedagogical approach. The ideal is that classes originate in the school building, extend out into the city and involve learning by doing. Both classes and internships culminate in final projects. In classes like Democracy in Action, for example, young people identify social issues that affect the local community, study them through qualitative research methods, and develop plans for taking action to address them.

City-As-School is currently the only public school in New York City with experiential learning at its core. As programs like Parkway have closed due to societal and economic shifts, models like City-As-School have become increasingly rare.<sup>5</sup> This underscores the need for closer examination of the City-As-School model.

## **The Internship Program**

City-As-School's internship program remains unique in its ability to actualize Deweyan-style experiential learning in the New York City public school system. This section highlights three key principles of the internship program that contribute to its success and sustainability and may inform similar work in other settings.

## **The Internship is Central**

Natalia highlighted the centrality of the internship program at City-As-School in a June 2013 graduation speech. She said:

I was asked to give a speech today. I thought I couldn't do it.... Speculating about what other people may think of you is paralyzing. If there was such a thing as a graduation speech internship, City-As would have us practice speaking everywhere—schools, parks, trains, and Madison Square Garden.<sup>6</sup>

Learning by doing in the real world of New York City is central to City-As-School's approach. Without real-world experience, taking on adult tasks is difficult. This is particularly important for young people on the cusp of adulthood.

The student schedule directly reflects the centrality of internships. Students participate in credit-bearing internships at one of over 300 organizations across the city for half of every school week. Most internships—like most classes—last for one academic cycle, which is eight to ten weeks long. Internships are credit bearing, just as classes are, and the academic credits accumulated through internships count towards the 44 credits needed to graduate from New York City public schools.

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5 While many School Without Walls models have closed, the Rochester School Without Walls still exists, as does a school without walls in Washington, D.C. The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (MET), with schools in Providence and Oakland, is nationally known for offering learning through internships.

6 All names of students and alumni are pseudonyms. The graduation speech has been reprinted at [www.cityas.org](http://www.cityas.org).

The school's staffing plan also demonstrates the centrality of the internship program. Approximately 40 percent of the pedagogical staff are full-time internship coordinators. The remaining pedagogues are in-house teachers and advisors. The internship coordinators are responsible for identifying internship sites and field-based mentors at those sites, connecting students to internships, creating a personalized learning plan for each student at each site, collecting daily internship attendance, communicating regularly with students and mentors, visiting students in the field, and working with mentors to support student learning. They are also responsible for working with students to conceptualize, implement, document and present unique internship projects. Projects are supported through a Resource Seminar that meets once a week for 90 minutes as well as through field-based visits and online communication.

The process through which students acquire internships highlights their importance. Students must interview for internships, which requires contacting the field-based mentor, setting up an appointment, travelling to the site, and interviewing with the mentor. Students can lose their internships at any point in an academic cycle due to poor performance or inconsistent attendance. When a student loses an internship, he must find a new one.

Most students, including Natalia, thrive in a school that makes internships a central responsibility, but a handful of students struggle with them. Some students are shy, some find the commute challenging, some cannot attend regularly, and some dislike the active nature of internships. Internship coordinators and advisors work with such students to help them identify internships that meet their interests and needs, and students who persistently struggle with external internships might be given assistantships within the school. While such measures do not guarantee success, they often help. New students sometimes find internships a challenge because they are not used to them. Travelling to an internship site, interacting with adults, and following through on responsibilities is significantly different from traditional classroom-based learning. To address this, the school recently created a Bridge program that places new students in supportive group internships. Now more new students are successfully earning credit in their internships than ever before.

## **Authentic Learning**

At City-As-School, internships are not simply a convenient way for struggling students to earn academic credit and develop vocational skills, nor are they a reward for seniors with strong track records, as they are at many schools. Rather, as Natalia noted in her graduation speech, "City-As School teaches us to construct meaning through experience."

Students become apprentices to experts at organizations ranging from law firms to art galleries to science laboratories and develop personalized final projects that emerge from their internship experience and are shared with colleagues at their sites. Elijah, who enjoyed working outside with his hands, conducted scientific experiments to determine which fertilizer best promoted plant growth at an urban farm and presented this as his Science Performance Based Assessment Task (PBAT). Francis, who loved soccer but hated writing, researched the role of sports in small schools, wrote a paper documenting his inquiry and findings, and presented it to his mentor at the Manhattan Borough President's office as a Social Studies PBAT. Laura and Elaine, two young women actively considering aspects of their gender identity, analyzed their internship experience at a feminist bookstore through the lens of the writings of bell hooks and presented it as a Social Studies PBAT. These students explored and applied academic content in connection with practical experience.

As these examples suggest, the internship is also a vehicle for finding oneself as an individual and community member. Natalia spoke to the personally transformative power of experiential learning: "More than just being different, City-As helps us to become who we are as individuals." Students are able to explore their interests and clarify their values through internships.

Internships also provide students with a powerful opportunity to take on adult responsibilities and redress mistakes. As Natalia joked in her speech,

At a City-As speech internship we could experience: making mistakes, not showing up, making up time, driving a Resource coordinator insane and then finally, giving a speech and receiving credit! City-As-School encourages us to go out there and do it until we get it right.

Making mistakes in the real world, trying again, and eventually "getting it right" is central to learning and growth.

While many City-As-School students engage in authentic learning and find themselves through internships, some students never find an internship that appeals to them, although they may complete the experience in order to earn academic credit. Some graduate after only a semester, and some are unable to attend regularly enough to fully participate in internships. Internship coordinators and advisors engage in extensive outreach in an effort to re-engage them, but the outreach is not always effective.



## Freedom, Choice & Support

The freedom to make choices is another central principle of the City-As-School internship program. At most public schools—and schools in general—students are given a schedule for the year. At City-As-School, the year is divided into four cycles, and students build their own programs every cycle. After creating a registration plan with her advisor, a student meets with internship coordinators and teachers at their desks and registers for classes and internships with them. The student then returns to her advisor with a completed program consisting of three classes and an internship for the cycle. In this way, the registration process resembles the registration process that young people typically encounter in college.

Students have a good deal of choice in terms of internships. For example, Nathan, who struggled with anxiety, elected to complete some Physical Education credits through an internship at a local yoga studio on Tuesday and Thursdays. He took yoga classes, helped to organize the studio, attended lectures, and used the bookroom. Ila, a strong artist, elected to earn Art credits through an internship at a local gallery, where she helped to curate events. Melanie, who loved animals, earned Science credit as a veterinary assistant at a local animal hospital. Lucas, who identifies as gay, earned a Social Studies credit through an internship at Lambda Legal.

In many cases, internship experiences translate into post-secondary opportunities. Stephanie, who dreamed about entering the fashion world, gained entrance to a competitive program at the Fashion Institute of Technology largely due to her real-world experience in a fashion showroom. Kendall, who loved to bake, was hired to apprentice full time at a local bakeshop, where she had interned.

Students confront very real choices in their internships every day. These choices might be as simple as what to do when running late, they might be fun choices like what kind of chocolate to create as part of an internship at a chocolate shop in Brooklyn, or they might be more challenging like what to do when a child is crying at a daycare center or how to handle a personality conflict with a mentor. If an art gallery is holding an exhibit, student interns might be asked to help prepare the physical space, email guests reminders, and welcome guests at the door. If a documentary film organization is holding a screening, student interns must ensure that their own film is edited and ready for viewing on time. If an elementary school teacher asks a student intern to guest-teach the class, the intern must prepare and implement a lesson. Making such choices requires taking on adult responsibilities.

Of course, young people sometimes make choices that have negative short-term consequences. For example, if a student is repeatedly late to or absent from an internship, he may lose the internship and have to find a new one. If a student acts unprofessionally during a conflict with a mentor, she may be asked to resolve the conflict before continuing with the internship. The school provides each student with a support network. All students are connected with advisors and each of the school's twenty advisors is an in-house teacher who is linked with 25 to 30 students. Advisors meet with their advisees weekly as a group and regularly for individual conferences. The advisor is the main connection between the school, student, and family. Each advisor is connected with a member of the guidance team, whose role is to support students in dealing with crisis, trauma, mental health issues, and long-term absenteeism. When students struggle to make productive choices during their internships, they will likely be asked to meet with their internship coordinators, advisors and guidance links.

## **The Student Experience**

Natalia is not the only City-As-School alumni to view her time at City-As-School as transformative. Personal interviews with alumni suggest that transferring to City-As-School is a life-altering experience for many students. James, who graduated in 2008, said that his “favorite things were internships instead of taking classes.” “It was a big deal for me,” he explained, “because I learned better and more through going out and doing stuff.” James attributed his re-engagement in learning to internships:

I interned at numerous locations including P.S. 87, which gave me insight into teaching, as well as the Intrepid Sea Air Space Museum, which increased my interest in studying History. I forced myself to do well in classes because I felt, not only would it help me get into an acceptable college, but it would shape me into a more respectable human being. Once I began trying harder, I saw positive results, and so carried this positive attitude with me to college. It has proved incredibly useful. Not only that, but it has inspired me to be an artistic polymath. I have always written screenplays and short stories but now strive to do much more. I plan on writing and drawing comics, shooting feature films, publishing novels, and teaching at City-As-School. (personal interview)

James identified freedom and choice in a supportive environment as central to his development and learning:

One thing that I found admirable was the way that the teachers treated their students. They allowed us to call them by their first names, stuck around after class to talk with us, and tried to be as understanding as possible no matter what we said or did inside and outside of school. For teachers to be on the same page as students, it seems to require a great deal of patience and understanding. That does not mean that students are free to do whatever they want. It only means that students might not get things right the first time, and if they don't, teachers are expected to help pave the way with a healthy balance of discipline and care. (personal interview)

Brian, who graduated in 2001, describes a process of connecting to himself and the larger community while at City-As-School. Citing internships like the "Poetry Project, Educational Video Center, Boston NY AIDS Ride" as pivotal experiences, he says:

A lot of it was making me confident, making me believe that I could show up to any of these places and do well. It made me feel more connected to the city, that I know the city and have a better understanding of it. (personal interview)

Brian identified the ability to "try out as many things as you can" and "see what you're interested in" as a central benefit of the internship program. He attributed much of his own confidence and passion to his time at City-As-School:

My time here gave me confidence that I didn't have. Showed me that I could run my life, that I was in charge and not my parents, and that was huge. It was my first taste of adulthood. Making your own decisions. (personal interview)

Brian explored his interests, became more independent, came to appreciate the value of hard work, and deepened his connection to New York City.

Nora, who graduated in 2010, echoes James and Brian when she says that she appreciated the freedom to "take classes when and where" she wanted, about subjects she cared about. This aspect transferred to her thinking about college. She said, "The New School doesn't create standards for my education—I do." Other aspects of City-As-School that Nora found important include:

Caring about us. Making us feel special. Finding our talent and helping us cultivate it. Giving us chances to redo what was previously deemed impossible. Knowing we inherently wanted to change the past, and that we were all trying to run from it. Acknowledging our drug use and not treating us like delinquents. Understanding our parents couldn't always meet so it was better to give us the power instead. Exposing us to internships and opportunities that no one would have ever thought

of bringing onto the table. Building our confidence by laughing at our jokes. Keeping us sane during times procrastination set in. Reminding us that there was always another cycle, another chance. (personal interview)

City-As-School made Nora feel special, cultivated her individual talents, helped her to learn from mistakes, and opened up internships and other opportunities. Even challenges like drug use were addressed without making young people feel ashamed or humiliated.

## **Final Thoughts**

Although there are clear principles for maintaining an internship program like City-As-School's, applying these principles is far from easy. The external context has shifted since 1972. While City-As-School benefits from a standardized testing waiver that decouples the curricula from test preparation, the school is still subject to the same bureaucratic requirements and accountability measures as other New York City public schools. As Gary Anderson (2009) and others have argued, market-based education reform initiatives have come to dominate in the United States, since the passage of No Child Left Behind in 1994, and "business-oriented restructuring schemes involving merit pay, statistical quality control, site-based management, high-stakes assessments, incentive schemes, privatization and marketization" have proliferated at the local, state and national levels (Anderson, 2009, p. 10). According to Anderson, the singular focus on rules, procedures, and accountability measures that characterizes market-based reforms threatens to cause "a diminution of authentic activities in classrooms and of authentic relationships among students, teachers, and communities" (p. 11).

City-As-School, like all public schools in New York City, has been affected by this phenomenon, particularly since Mayor Bloomberg won control of the city schools in 2002 and appointed Chancellor Klein, who instituted a series of market-based reforms as part of his Children's First Initiative.

These reforms have affected the school's internship program in significant ways. High-stakes accountability measures, for instance, affect the school's willingness to experiment with new approaches. The accountability system created by Klein utilized attendance, credit earning, pass rates on standardized exams, and graduation rates as measures of success. These metrics continue to serve as a key component of yearly school and principal evaluations, which factor into decisions regarding principal tenure and retention. For example, the internship program and classes have

historically had minimal connection to each other, besides operating within a project-based pedagogical framework, largely because classes were added in order to allow students to fulfill very specific credit requirements and complete PBATs. While it might seem logical to more closely connect classes and internships, it would likely result in students taking longer to graduate.

External audits have also led to shifts in the nature of internship-based learning at City-As-School in recent years. During the school's early history, academic credit was awarded on the basis of experience at internships. The products created by students varied greatly and, in some cases, journalistic accounts of a student's experience was the internship project. A student would complete credit requirements in government by interning with a judge or in a lawyer's office and without writing a more traditional paper. Following academic audits conducted by the Department of Education's Office of Academic Policy, individualized syllabi were instituted to detail the academic credits and related state standards for each internship and internship projects became increasingly academic in nature, with a heavier focus on a written product that documents a student's learning in the area. While this approach to the internship project provides documentation for potential auditors, some internship coordinators feel that it limits the possibility of truly emergent learning. They feel that some internship projects seem forced in that the content and product are disconnected from the student's actual experience..

Bureaucratic requirements like individual syllabi for each internship have increased the amount of time that internship coordinators must devote to paperwork. In addition to creating written syllabi for each of their 35 interns every cycle, internship coordinators must also maintain student schedules and enter grades in a centralized online program maintained by the Department of Education in order to track each student's completion of graduation requirements. Internships are frequently interdisciplinary in nature and are individualized for each student. They are difficult to translate into the centralized program, which is designed for classroom teachers. As a result, a single internship might be listed three times under three different subject areas on a student's transcript. Internship coordinators are responsible for verifying the accuracy of the listings for each student each cycle, submitting paperwork to correct any errors, and then entering grades in the online system. This centralized tracking system is not only tedious but requires coordinator time that could otherwise be spent working with students in the field.

Negotiating bureaucratic systems is made all the more difficult by the political-economic challenges that affect all urban public schools. Many City-As-School students struggle with poverty-related issues such as unstable housing, lack of financial and other resources, family and personal illness,

substance abuse, and limited access to transportation. This affects their ability to attend school consistently and focus on learning. Supporting young people in overcoming such challenges so that they may fully engage in their internships is difficult in and of itself. It is particularly challenging, given that each internship coordinator works with 35 students per cycle. And although the school's faculty-to-student ratio is relatively low by public school standards, it is not as low as many suburban and private schools.

Internal and external challenges make sustaining an experiential learning program in a public school setting difficult, but City-As-School has shown that it is possible and worthwhile. Internship programs that capture the spirit of Dewey can be sustained in public schools, and the promising practices that inform the internship program at City-As-School can be applied in other settings. Despite obstacles and challenges, by making internships central, engaging young people in authentic real-world learning, and providing choice, freedom, and support, public schools can actualize the kind of experiential learning Dewey envisioned.

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# The Center for Inquiry: Anatomy of a Successful Progressive School

*Christine Leland, Amy Wackerly, & Christine Collier*

In an essay for *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series 27*, Gil Schmerler observed, “Looking for rays of sunshine against an educational landscape that has taken a particularly horrific beating in the last decade or two is a difficult—maybe quixotic—undertaking” (2012, p. 30). As educators who have witnessed that metaphorical beating “up close and personal,” we concur. But during the same time period, we have also experienced the inception, growth and undeniable success of a progressive public school in an urban district. While we cannot credit a single factor for this result, we can show how a combination of factors has supported its success over time. First, teachers at the school have remained committed to their touchstone belief that creative, holistic learning environments produce effective opportunities for learning. Second, the school has maintained a strong partnership with teacher educators at a local university. And third, parents have actively participated in making decisions about the direction of the school. It is our hope that the story behind this school will provide a glimpse of sunlight—as well as some lessons for advocates of public education who see vibrant democratic learning communities as one way to support both equity and excellence.

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Indianapolis opened as a magnet program in 1993. It was the product of a collaborative effort between a group of Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) teachers and several faculty members from the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington (IUB) and Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI). The teachers and professors obtained a grant to spend time over two years learning about holistic inquiry-based teaching (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996) and critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015). The teachers then went back to their classrooms and kept meeting and planning a new magnet program focused on what they had learned about the power of constructivist teaching and learning. After a series of discussions that included their university collaborators, the teachers submitted a proposal that was selected for funding.

The IPS district in the early 1990s was dealing with large losses in student population and the superintendent was looking for ways to keep families from moving to the suburbs for better educational opportunities. Magnet schools were seen as a way to make the large urban district more attractive. They were public schools but they were given some freedom to plan curriculum

and choose instructional materials appropriate to their themes. However, the superintendent made it clear that the magnet programs would be operational only as long as there was parental support and the students got acceptable test scores. Furthermore, it was up to the schools to “sell” their programs to prospective parents at annual school fairs.

The original CFI magnet program opened in fall, 1993. It was housed in one wing of a larger IPS school and included five classroom teachers, one inclusion teacher, and about 100 K-5 children. The role of the inclusion teacher was to push into classrooms and co-teach with classroom teachers to serve learners with special education needs. She also served as a resource to the students and teachers. Like most of the schools in the district, this one had a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches. A professor from IUPUI who had been working with the teachers started teaching literacy classes onsite as soon as the school opened. By the following fall, a cohort of 20 college students took up residence on a full-time basis. These teacher education interns worked with IUPUI faculty members and attended classes onsite in a university classroom designated for their use. When the interns were not in class, they were working with children and teachers in the classrooms. All of the teachers, interns, and professors met after school once a week to debrief, plan curriculum, and share observations of children who were struggling. The group generated ideas for trying alternative pedagogies to support these learners and for collecting data to monitor progress.

Parents also played a role in setting the agenda for the new program. They were invited to a series of evening meetings to talk with staff and university partners about what they wanted for their children. One memory from an early meeting is of a parent who said she had a complaint. As we (teachers and professors) exchanged nervous glances, she went on to say that her daughter was so anxious to be in school that she had to fight with her to stay home when she was sick. She found this unsettling, as it had never happened before. We all took it as an auspicious start.

Fast forward to 2016. A lot has happened in 23 years! Due largely to parent demand and good test scores, the original K-5 CFI program has grown into a K-8 program encompassing three IPS schools and serving over 1,000 students. A fourth CFI is scheduled to open at the start of the 2016-17 school year. The program, teachers, and principals have won recognition and numerous awards for excellence. CFI staff and university collaborators have presented and consulted nationally and internationally on inquiry-based education and critical literacy. As a thought collective, they have published numerous articles highlighting the work of CFI students and teachers (e.g. Leland, Ociepka, & Wackerly, 2015; Leland, Ociepka, & Kuonen, 2012; Leland, Harste, & Kuonen, 2008).

The teacher education connection with IUPUI has served as an excellent incubator for new teachers with a strong background in progressive pedagogies. Many CFI teachers (including fourth-grade teacher Amy Wackerly, one of the authors) are graduates of the program. This partnership has continued through the years and today all three CFI schools regularly host student teachers from IUPUI. Many students complete both semesters of their student teaching at a CFI school. Amy notes that now, just as in the past when she was in the program, student teachers become an integral part of the teaching team in each classroom. They work with teachers and other student teachers at their grade level to plan curriculum and instruct students daily. As they are immersed in this team-teaching, collaborative effort, they are also able to provide classroom supervision. This opens up opportunities for the veteran teachers to meet and discuss larger, school-wide issues.

To the district's credit, central office administrators have allowed the CFI leaders to hire personnel who support the school's progressive philosophy. Chris Collier, a teacher who was part of the group that created the school, serves as principal at one of the three CFI buildings and will be principal of the new CFI. She sees the university connection and the ability to hire like-minded professionals as playing essential roles in the school's success.

One significant change made to keep the program viable was the addition of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes. Amy Wackerly explains that the IB program was attractive to the CFI staff because it provided a clear framework to support the original inquiry/critical literacy focus of the school without challenging the teachers' goal of providing a creative, holistic learning environment. Elements of the IB Primary Years Program include six global themes: Who we are, Where we are in place and time, How we express ourselves, How the world works, How we organize ourselves, Sharing the planet (International Baccalaureate, 2010). As a result of the IB influence, teachers in the Primary Years Programme have moved from an interdisciplinary curriculum to a transdisciplinary curriculum.

A transdisciplinary curriculum focuses on concepts and contexts rather than on themes as traditionally imagined. Transdisciplinary skills are defined as those that situate students for learning, no matter the subject area. These include the skills of critical thinking, self-management, research, communication, and working productively with others. Many of these skills will sound familiar to readers, and indeed they have always been part of the tradition of progressive education. In many ways, transdisciplinary teaching reflects a return to progressive roots in a way that the superficiality of "interdisciplinary," with its topical themes, does not.

Although the school day is no longer segmented into different subject areas, the disciplines are still used to provide a unique lens on the concepts explored. Students are encouraged to focus on issues across, between, and beyond learning areas so that broader perspectives can emerge. The goal is to develop a deep understanding of the interrelationships among complex issues.

When teachers work together to plan units of study, they talk about how to include transdisciplinary concepts within a global perspective. They also keep track of how state standards are naturally incorporated into the units, as the school is held accountable to these measures. This expanded curricular focus has added an international dimension. Students in all three CFI schools now learn both Spanish and Mandarin and are challenged to think globally as well as locally.

Although the IB program has added depth to the curriculum, the school's core progressive values have remained constant. Amy explains that as teachers plan and write curriculum, they still put students at the center of their teaching. Students have a choice about what they read and write, and their *I Wonder* inquiry questions, which help to focus instruction on their interests within the concepts being taught, drive the curriculum.

For example, when Amy's class was learning about the concept of energy, many of the lessons focused on sound and light, following the science standards. However, some of the students' *I Wonder* questions required a deeper understanding than provided by the basic curriculum. Students were given time and support to research one of their questions in depth. Their questions included: How does sonar work? What animals use echolocation and how does it work? What are the different types of musical instruments from around the world? How do we see rainbows? Students developed research, note-taking and writing skills and published their findings in a classroom magazine.

Another constant element is the critical literacy perspective that encourages students and teachers to consider the role of language and its impact on social justice. As Janks (2014) has argued, language in any context is never neutral. It is always used to support a particular perspective or worldview. Critically literate people are aware of this and ask questions like the following: How does a text (or a movie, advertisement, or video game) "position" people? Who benefits from the portrayal and who is marginalized by it? What kind of social action might be taken to achieve a more equitable resolution? How can we work together to make a difference? Amy describes what social action looks like at the elementary level:

Action can range from students going home and on their own looking something up on the web or in a book about a concept, to a student working to bring about some type of change. When our class was studying communities, we not only looked at our Indianapolis community, but at communities around the world. We learned how communities were formed, how they change over time, and how to take an active part in different communities. Students spent time identifying the various communities they were each involved in (e.g., school, city, world, neighborhood, religious) and then developed a plan to take action to help one of them. Projects they designed included neighborhood clean-ups, making dinner for friends who did not have enough to eat, making and selling soup and donating the money for Ebola research, and collecting items for homeless people. One of the projects a student proposed as a third grader, building a play area in her neighborhood, is being carried out this year. After we read the book *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park [2011], four students went to the principal and asked if they could do a fundraiser to help raise money to build wells. Giving students agency to take steps to make the world a better place is one way CFI helps students become globally minded citizens of the world.

Taking a critical literacy perspective also means that educators recognize the right of all children to see themselves in the books they read (Bishop, 1992). Because of this, CFI teachers make a conscious effort to introduce books that address tough social issues like racism, poverty, and homophobia. Even in the primary grades, children hear their teachers read social issues books (e.g., Leland & Harste with Huber, 2005) about families with single-sex parents, kids visiting relatives in prison, and stories with characters who are challenged by racism, poverty, or war. These books open up conversations as students relate them to their own lives and, as Amy explains, “One goal of the school is to not shut down conversations.”

When students or teachers identify problems within the school community, the problems themselves become the focus of inquiry and everyone becomes a researcher. Students read books about other people who have been in similar situations, collect survey data, and make observations about how and when the problem seems to show up. This prepares them to take a proactive role in resolving it.

While most of the social issues books end on a hopeful note, difficult situations are not simply wished away. Chris Leland, an IUPUI professor who worked with the original group of teachers to design and launch the school, finds that her adult students are sometimes shocked by the painful reality of some of the social issues books. Some students initially argue for preserving what they

call “the innocence of childhood,” but quickly become advocates for addressing difficult topics after they see the meaningful conversations the children engage in (Leland & Harste, 2005). This connects to the teachers’ practice of not talking down to kids or assuming that they won’t understand complex issues. Quite the contrary, they have found that students want to “keep it real” and talk about issues they are facing in their own lives. At the end of the Primary Years Programme in grade 5, students choose an issue and develop a project to address it. Over the years students have taken on issues such as teen pregnancy, domestic violence, and sustainability. They research the issue, share their findings, and take some sort of social action.

These factors help explain the longevity of a program that has grown significantly without sacrificing any of its major tenets. In this age of school-bashing and corporate takeovers, survival is no small accomplishment. However, there are also areas of concern. One is the ever-encroaching shadow of standards. While the IB programs have given staff some space in which to maneuver, they are still required to meet state and national accountability measures. Fortunately, teachers have found that many standards are general enough to interpret and include in the concept-based unit studies. When asked about the state standards, Amy explained it this way:

We looked at them and thought about how what we were already doing fit in with them. We had to do some tweaking but the big concepts stayed intact. We had to negotiate where the various units went—and some of them had to move into different grade levels.

Amy pointed out that finding time for this kind of work is challenging since it requires time for reflection and cannot be done alone: “If teachers don’t have opportunities to think and collaborate, they can become ‘activity gatherers’ who don’t ground their practice in anything.”

Another area of concern is the growing influence of standardized testing. The CFI was funded with the caveat that it would be closed if test scores were not acceptable and this specter remains. While test scores have not been a problem overall, the idea that the existence of the school depends on something so arbitrary and disconnected from the actual curriculum is both distracting and unnerving.

An even larger concern is the current national discourse of attacks on schools, teachers, and public education in general. When asked what worries her most, Principal Chris Collier talked about the status of public education. Given the battles that public schools have to fight, she wonders about the motives of so-called reformers and the future of public education: “Educators don’t have a



voice. They are perceived as not knowing much. The teaching shortage is not surprising given how teachers are paid and treated. Programs like Teach for America send the message that anyone can do this.” Shrinking enrollment numbers in many teacher education programs support this supposition.

Within the local Indianapolis context, Collier identifies the continued decrease in state funding as an additional challenge. School leaders are scrambling to find additional funding sources for IB fees, teacher training, and other so-called “extras” that are necessary to maintain strong programs. Additionally, the shrinking student population within the district means that funds to compete for high-quality teachers are scarce. The result, according to Collier, is that “We can’t offer the same salaries as some of our neighboring districts.”

Given all of these challenges, there is no guarantee that the school will continue to thrive. However, since it has survived in tough times for more than two decades, progressive educators can learn from the experience. One important lesson is that the voices and opinions of parents matter a lot. Parents know when their kids are happy and productive and will fight to keep them out of schools that silence and repress them. Parents have been crucial allies in keeping the CFI open and growing. When the waiting list at the first CFI became chronically long, parents voiced their unhappiness and the district enlisted Collier and CFI staff to replicate the program in another school. They did the same thing when there were two CFIs and still not enough spaces for families to enroll their children. As of November 2015, there were over 350 students on waiting lists to get into one of the existing CFI schools and the school board voted to add a fourth CFI, opening in the fall of 2016.

But growth is not simply a matter of putting a name on a building. As CFI continues to grow, teachers and university partners worry about maintaining the integrity of the program. Finding staff with shared philosophical beliefs and experience is crucial to the success of ongoing expansion.

Parents are also crucial allies in the fight to save public education at the national level. A case in point is the statement released by President Obama, acknowledging the view that standardized testing is out of control and changes need to be made (Doering, 2015). What might not be obvious is the significant role that parents have played by refusing to let their children participate in something they knew was not good for them or their schools. According to Valerie Strauss (2016), “The testing opt-out movement is growing, despite government efforts to kill it.”

The unique mix of factors that came together to make CFI successful during a difficult time for progressive educators might not be replicable in other situations. But the various pieces of the puzzle are instructive in their own right. First, partnerships between higher education faculty and K-12 teachers and administrators can be mutually beneficial. While each group has different needs and goals, there are also many points of intersection. Second, inviting parents into the process of designing and running schools brings unforeseen dividends. Parents learn to identify the characteristics of schools that truly support their children's learning, and once they have this knowledge, they lobby tirelessly to get the kind of schools they want. Third, and maybe most important, remaining true to our belief in the power of creative, holistic teaching is essential; indeed, we see it as the bottom line for what makes a program sustainable over time.

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**Christine Foxen Collier** was a founding member of the Center for Inquiry (CFI) schools and has served as principal of the original school, leading its authorization as the first IB World School in Indiana to offer the Primary Years Program. She led the replication at CFI School 84 where she currently serves as principal. She will open the fourth CFI school in July of 2016. Ms. Collier was named a National Distinguished Principal in 2011.

# Beyond Child-Centered Constructivism: A Call for Culturally Sustaining Progressive Pedagogy

*Alisa Algava*

## Prologue: Progressive Education for All?

A Black teacher speaking on a panel at the 2015 Progressive Education Network Conference in New York City asked, “Why do so few progressive schools serve *our* kids? Why are most of the educators white when working-class children of color *are* given an opportunity to have a progressive education?”<sup>1</sup> These questions and contradictions are not new. While notable exceptions exist, progressive practices, historically and still today, are not often found in public school settings for children from communities and families marginalized by structural racism and poverty. These schools are disproportionately dispossessed by policies that narrow curricula, mandate high-stakes tests, and police children and teachers (Fabricant & Fine, 2013). Teacher education programs grapple with the realities of preparing a teaching force dominated by white middle-class women (Sleeter, 2001). And skills-based instruction continues to be falsely positioned in direct opposition to inquiry-based learning (Delpit, 1995). The constraints on educators’ abilities, but not their desire, to see and honor each child, culture, and community are real.

A tension between child-centered and social reconstructionist/social justice aims has existed since John Dewey’s time. Believing that our schools can and must build a new social order, George Counts confronted the Progressive Education Association in 1932 about the limited and limiting scope of a developmentalist educational philosophy:

If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become somewhat less frightened than it is today at the bogeys of

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1 I capitalize Black and Brown but not white in this article in order to call attention to how power and racial in/justice are represented and can be implicitly reproduced or explicitly contested through grammar and language.

imposition and indoctrination. In a word, Progressive Education cannot build its program out of the interests of the children: it cannot place its trust in a child-centered school. (Counts, 1932/1978, p. 7)

And yet, nearly a century later, progressive schools typically—though not exclusively, as this essay will explore—continue to focus their attention on child-centered pedagogies and continue to serve children and families whose economic, social, and cultural capital already serves them well.

In 2016, who has access to progressive education? Where are the schools located that are able to embrace constructivism and reject a skills-only, test-prep approach, and who do they serve? Which communities can take the risk to opt out of high-stakes tests? How do urban progressive schools and educators contend with and contest the false dichotomy of the either/or decisions we often feel forced to make—between teaching skills or critical thinking, between academic rigor or play- and inquiry-based learning? Although early 20th-century progressive theorists and practitioners—including John Dewey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Carter G. Woodson, Caroline Pratt, Elsie Clapp, Horace Mann Bond, Anna Julia Cooper, George Counts, Harold Rugg, and Ann Shumaker—indeed envisioned otherwise, why does progressive education still seem to be reserved for those with wealth and whiteness? We might find an entry point into these big questions through an examination, critique, and visioning of progressive pedagogy and curricula that pushes beyond child-centered, developmentally appropriate practice into the realm of culturally sustaining teaching and learning. As a white progressive school educator and leader, my inquiry zooms in on one question: How might we reimagine constructivist practices and curricula so that we purposefully, consistently, critically engage questions of pedagogy, power, and culture through a sociocultural/sociopolitical lens? The promise of progressive practices in public schools resides in their inherently political and activist potential, in a vision of public education in and for an authentically democratic society.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The challenge is not about making progressive schools “work” for Black and Brown children. In this paper, I’m arguing that child-centered, constructivist pedagogies and curricula cannot be colorblind, or even multicultural, if we want progressive education to live up to its potential for all kids and for our society. Pedagogical shifts that prioritize sociopolitical understanding are needed in every kind of progressive school, with children and families of all races and ethnicities, heritage languages, family structures, and economic backgrounds. With culturally sustaining pedagogies we can take a step closer to truly democratic and perhaps even socially transformative public education.



## Why a Critical and Sociocultural Critique/Reimagining of Pedagogy?

*Twenty-four kindergartners sit on the large blue rug with clipboards on their laps and pencils in their hands. Seated on small chairs at the front of the group, Xavier, his mom Sandra, and his older brother Mahkyle wait to be interviewed. The five-year-olds take turns asking questions the class has prepared in advance about where Xavier's family lives, how many people are in the family, what languages they speak, if they celebrate any holidays, what they do for fun, and whether they have a family pet. They pause after each question to document the information they've just learned with pictures, letters, words, and symbols. Although this isn't the first interview of their Family Study, it is an exciting one, and the kindergartners are a bit jumpier than usual. Mahkyle brought along his pet snake, and the kindergartners know that during Center Time after the interview they will get to meet the snake and maybe even hold it. Some of them are even already thinking about the page they will write and draw later that afternoon to contribute to Xavier's Family Book.<sup>3</sup>*

Beginning in kindergarten, the students at Town Square School (TSS), a racially and economically mixed public progressive elementary school in New York City, learn how to be researchers of their experiences, their lives, and their worlds. The school's mission prioritizes inclusive and rigorous learning in meaningful, real-world contexts. Alongside reading, writing, and math instruction, children at each grade level engage in long-term inquiry-based interdisciplinary studies in which they research, document, discuss, and create. The terms *research* and *researcher* appear throughout the written curriculum maps and the spoken language used in every classroom in the school. Through constructivist pedagogy—a central approach enacted in progressive schools—these students learn to create their own knowledge. They ask questions, decide how and where to find information, gather ideas and evidence, represent what they've discovered, and ask new questions. Yes, they are learning how to learn.

Family interviews are one part of the kindergarten Family Study, which deeply engages children in researching and reflecting on their family and cultural experiences while guiding them to consider how their identities and experiences may be similar to and different from those of other families. We know that learning does not happen in isolation. As Vygotsky (1978) and others since have theorized, the social context influences how and what we learn; individuals both mediate and are mediated by our environments through the people, objects, symbols, tools, and practices we encounter (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Social, cultural, and historical power cannot ever be

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3 The names of all people and the school are pseudonyms. I am grateful to the children, teachers, and leaders of Town Square School for sharing your experiences, practices, and reflections.

disentangled from the ways in which students engage with texts in and of the world, and with each other (Gee, 2012; Freire, 1970/1988). Constructivist pedagogy can and should be intertwined with a sociocultural stance toward children's learning and development. And the pedagogies progressive teachers take up can either deny and *perpetuate* or acknowledge and *contest* imbalances of access and power in how young people conceive of, construct, and dis/own their learning, literacies, and identities.

How we see our students matters, and a substantive body of both research and practice disputes deficit-based approaches by demanding the recognition of students' strengths and promoting teaching that builds on their existing fluencies, knowledge, and skills (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995a; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Twenty years ago, Ladson-Billings (1995b) challenged the typical developmental and cultural mismatch/deficit views of learning and schooling when she articulated a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which Paris (2012) has since reconceptualized as culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP).<sup>4</sup> Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) described culturally relevant teachers as those who view their students as capable and hold them to high expectations, conceive of knowledge in a critical and constructivist Freirean sense, scaffold and critique curricula, and assess learning from multiple angles. These teachers develop a collaborative community of learners in their classrooms, get involved in the larger community, prioritize relationships, and see themselves as learners. This description parallels the most engaged and effective progressive school teaching that I have read about, witnessed, and experienced. In fact, Ladson-Billings (1995b) wrote that she often is asked, "Isn't what you described just 'good teaching'?" She then deepened the critique, noting that this kind of "just good teaching" is seldom evident in our classrooms and schools filled with minoritized children (p. 484).

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4 The three key components of culturally relevant teaching are: "an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 483). More recently, Paris (2012) introduced the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy as a reimagining of culturally relevant pedagogy. Emphasizing that terms like responsive and relevant are not sufficient, Paris and Alim (2014) "offer a loving critique" of asset-based pedagogies like CRP, and theorize CSP as an approach by which educators and scholars can "perpetuate and foster linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (p. 85). Ladson-Billings (2014) also critiques the misuse of CRP and supports a CSP "remix" when she challenges practitioners to push beyond static and superficial conceptions of identities and culture, to understand their fluidity, hybridity, and complexity, and to "[take] up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work, instead [of] dulling its critical edge or omitting it altogether" (p.77).

It is not a simple task to attain the understandings and skill sets needed to sustain a balance in helping students develop skills and knowledge, cultural competence, *and* critical consciousness. Trying to assess why culturally sustaining pedagogy is not more widely engaged would involve an analysis of K-12 policy, teacher education, the political economy around schooling, and the purposes of public education itself. Structural violence that systematically reinscribes inequity—racialized and economically segregated schools and neighborhoods, the corporatization and privatization of public education, high-stakes accountability, anti-union legislation, zero-tolerance discipline that criminalizes Black and Brown youth—constrains and obstructs educators’ abilities to imagine and enact what’s possible. Curriculum development, teacher education, professional learning communities, and family engagement are necessary but not sufficient facets of a transformative approach to urban school reform (Anyon, 2005b). While I am asserting the undeniable need for a macro lens, we might also begin small and think about what kind of change is possible one child, one teacher, one school at a time.

## **Transforming Constructivist Curricula into Culturally Sustaining Learning**

I have visited and taught in public progressive schools where educators strive to balance skills-based instruction with inquiry- and project-based curricula, an approach that is both strategically and philosophically in line with how Delpit (1995, 2012) conceptualized effective pedagogy for minoritized children. However, even in progressive schools, interdisciplinary studies often take an activity-based approach that does not explicitly address issues of culture, language, and power. A classic example is a typical early childhood apple study in which children create apple print paintings, eat and compare different kinds of apples, draw and write stories about apples, make applesauce, and perhaps even go apple picking. Although the kindergarten Apple Study at Town Square School took a more constructivist and integrated approach, the teachers realized that they could evolve this study to better meet their expectations for developing cultural competence among both children and teachers. Instead of focusing on apples, which the teachers saw as less culturally relevant, children now investigate the breads people eat and where in the world different kinds of breads originate. Since designing the Bread Study, teachers introduce ideas about similarities and differences specifically in relation to the concepts of identity, culture, and diversity that they prioritize.

And yet, culturally sustaining pedagogy is strikingly different from how multicultural education is typically enacted (Ladson-Billings, 1998). More than checking a celebrating “culture” or “diversity” box, CSP necessitates that teachers take a stand and actively engage their students in thinking deeply about how power works in the world.<sup>5</sup> While teachers are intentionally setting a foundation for learning about in/equity and in/justice in later grades, an important next step for this kindergarten study could be to incorporate local and global issues of food justice in developmentally appropriate ways. As TSS illustrates, ongoing transformation from inquiry-based multicultural curricula to culturally sustaining and perhaps even critical pedagogy<sup>6</sup> does not result from educators being handed “social justice” curricula and certainly does not happen overnight.

While many TSS interdisciplinary studies raised and addressed questions, concepts, and issues through a multicultural lens, a few years ago teachers began to identify opportunities for growth and change. In the initial version of the second-grade Park Study, the students investigated the physical structure and layout of a nearby city park, the activities of different people who use the park, the people who care for the park, the jobs it provides, and its history. After doing interviews, observations, and book research, the students collaboratively designed and constructed a model of their ideal park. However, the gentrification of the neighborhood and the ways in which differently raced and classed people do and do not interact in public spaces were left unexamined. In this particular study, the constructivist approach came close but didn’t reach the realm of teaching for social action and critical consciousness that Ladson-Billings (1995a) advocated:

Beyond those individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities. If school is about preparing students for

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5 Theoretical frames such as Critical Race Theory (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009) and neoliberal multiculturalism (Melamed, 2006) unveil multiculturalism and multicultural education as depoliticized constructs and approaches that typically do not take into account how narratives and myths of diversity, colorblindness, meritocracy and post-racialism support and solidify white supremacy in our societal structures and discourses. Culturally sustaining pedagogy can help educators explicitly address and contest the in/visibility of racialized power with our students on both individual and structural levels.

6 While culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a way in for many educators, we can and should push progressive education even further toward its liberatory potential. Critical pedagogy aims for critical consciousness and, ultimately, social transformation (Freire, 1970/1988), which can feel like lofty goals for teachers working in bureaucratic and inequitable school systems. Real-world examples of critical pedagogy/problem-posing education share applications and implications for those of us committed to working in and changing urban schools, ultimately allowing us to envision what is radically possible (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Landay & Wootton, 2012).

active citizenship, what better citizenship tool than the ability to critically analyze the society? (p. 162)

This seemingly missed opportunity can be contextualized within an emergent shared commitment at TSS to how teachers approach questions of race, power, justice, and equity.

After a few years of guiding seven-year-olds through the Park study, teachers purposefully began to engage a social justice lens by introducing their students to concepts of access, power, and activism. During the course of the study, second graders now also take trips to a variety of different city parks and interview people from a nonprofit parks advocacy organization. Using and strengthening the research skills they have been developing since kindergarten, students begin making connections among community assets and needs, unequal levels of investment and disinvestment in different neighborhoods, where decision-making power is located, and the role community organizations and constituents can play in advocating for change. Questions emerge from experience, and when it becomes clear that some children and neighborhoods have access to great playgrounds and bleachers near their baseball fields while others don't, larger concerns about in/equity and in/justice become part of the conversation.

Teachers' attention to naming access, power, and activism is reflective of a schoolwide shift at TSS, both in teacher-driven professional development and in an anti-bias, social justice approach emphasized in every interdisciplinary study from kindergarten through fifth grade. Although honoring individual and cultural difference had always been embedded in the work and learning students were doing, a few years ago teachers initiated an ongoing process of reflection, and they now explicitly address social advocacy in curricula, intentionally creating the space in which children develop and speak their critical voices.

And this kind of critique and activism happens with, for, and by children beginning in kindergarten. Taking a critical look at books about family is now an important aspect of the Family Study. Last year, over the course of a few days, teachers distributed books from more traditional classroom libraries and shared photos of the children's families taken during their family interviews, each time asking the children, "What do you notice?" Having already discussed skin color and family structures during their Who Am I? Study, the kindergartners pointed out the differences between the families in the books and their own families. They decided that more books are needed about all kinds of families, and so they wrote to children's book publishers with their request. By facilitating analysis and advocacy about who is and isn't represented in books about families in

relation to the kindergartners' own family visits and interviews, the teachers engaged all three dimensions of culturally relevant pedagogy theorized by Ladson-Billings (1995b). This investigation is only the beginning of conversations about social and racial equity and justice. Indeed, we must reimagine constructivist and developmentally appropriate practices as more expansive than the social-emotional and academic skills, understandings, and experiences our students are “ready” for. As we strive to enact the democratic, and perhaps even social reconstructionist, potential of progressive education (Meier, 2009), we must consciously address sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives as integral to children’s development and their experiences of school, and most importantly, to how children see themselves as active and critical learners, thinkers, and doers.

A crucial aspect of culturally sustaining pedagogy is that educators also critically examine our own assumptions, understandings and practice. A teacher-leader at Town Square School described how, over the past few years, a group of teachers has been creating a trajectory of professional learning and development for the entire staff, one that intentionally “digs deep into our own understanding of our identity, our race, our class, gender, sexuality, religion, amongst other things—those are all things we’re constantly thinking about.” She then explained:

It’s a process of building trust in the group, being able to share these stories, sometimes asking questions that are similar to questions we ask our kids....It’s not an isolated moment but a constant conversation we’re having, whether it’s through reading something and sharing our understanding of it, like thinking about microaggressions and what those mean and how we have either used them or had them used toward us and how we stand up and be an ally – it’s very similar to things we’re talking about with our kids.

In planning and reflecting on their pedagogy and curricula, teachers at TSS regularly reflect on broader questions of identity and power that they’re considering in their own professional development and on how those relate to the terms and concepts they are introducing to children. For example, when the second-grade team now prepares to discuss the concept of access with their students during the Park Study, they draw on their own collaborative inquiry around issues of class to inform the lessons they plan within a framework of what makes sense developmentally. According to this teacher-leader, rather than “now it’s talk-about-diversity time, it just becomes part of our practice because we have that lens on our work.” By cultivating a critically reflective space in which adults can feel a sense of agency around developing their own sociopolitical consciousness, teachers also experience culturally sustaining teaching and learning as dynamic and transformative. Participating in a community of critical educators directly informs our pedagogy, and we then have



the potential to move progressive education beyond the limits of child-centered, project-based learning.<sup>7</sup>

## **Theoretical Tools to Mobilize a Public Progressive School Movement**

Not all progressive school curricula and experiences are deeply rooted in students' lives and communities; in fact, far too few are. Nor do schools intentionally design their academic programs and professional learning opportunities to systematically address multiplicities of cultures and vantage points and the workings of power. There are many good reasons why in public schools—whether progressive or not—teachers do not typically engage culturally sustaining approaches, including the fact that public education has historically reproduced rather than dismantled structures and experiences of power, racialization, dispossession, and privilege (Anyon, 1997; Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Patel, 2015). But culturally sustaining pedagogy is not impossible work and, ultimately, can be far more transformative for the teachers, children, and schools who embrace it than a standards-based or even constructivist approach will ever be. And it seems that we have all of the theoretical and practical tools we need to envision and create progressive schools and a progressive education movement that purposefully align culturally sustaining and constructivist pedagogies. (*See Webliography and Bibliography of selected resources in sidebar.*)

In progressive schools, teachers know that children learn in a social context and that their intellectual and social-emotional learning are inseparable (Vygotsky, 1978). We pay attention to all aspects of children's development, recognize the unique strengths and needs each child brings to school each day, and understand how education cannot ever be one-size-fits-all. We know that small class size matters, that small schools promote authentic relationships and increase public education's democratic potential (Meier, 2002; Ayers, Klonsky, & Lyon, 2000). As Ted Sizer (1999) relentlessly advocated, "We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well" (p. 6). Taking up personalized, child-centered learning not as a pedagogical strategy but as an all-out critique of the dominant discourses of standardization and "closing the achievement gap," progressive educators can challenge the ways in which schools are structured to reproduce inequity. By explicitly framing children's learning and development as socially, culturally, linguistically, geographically,

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7 During a recent Bank Street leadership forum on social justice teaching, educators articulated two interdependent challenges we must address as we commit ourselves to culturally sustaining practices. One stated, "We focus on questions of power and change; we focus on connections to what's happening in our kids' lives now." Another added, "We can't ask our kids to grapple with these important essential questions if we won't do it on our own."

and historically situated, progressive educators can talk back to the larger narrative of contemporary school reform that continues to demand that benchmarks and standards be applied uniformly to all.

The question of where we locate “expertise” is addressed by sociocultural theory and sometimes, but not always, by progressive schools. A funds of knowledge approach, which identifies and fully integrates family and community assets into classroom learning (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), might feel familiar to those progressive educators who do home visits, construct curriculum around children’s interests and skills, and take a strengths-based stance regarding students and their families. Ultimately, though, funds of knowledge is not simply “a tool for teachers’ toolboxes,” an instructional strategy to be learned and used, but a way of seeing students, families, and the construction of knowledge itself. Children who have been historically marginalized by our schools and society already have critical habits of mind and heart, learned through lived experience. We need to share this strengths-not-deficits way of seeing with larger audiences. Funds of knowledge, as a well-documented research/practice-based theory, can be helpful to progressive educators who sometimes search for language and frameworks that describe to systems-level leaders and policymakers what we already intuitively know and do.

By emphasizing the interrelationship of progressive approaches such as personalization with sociocultural theories and practices like funds of knowledge, we can both strengthen cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness in our classrooms and begin to shift the school reform narrative. While progressive education implicitly confronts and contests deficit-based pedagogies, standardization, and high-stakes accountability by demanding space and time, prioritizing the developmental needs and interests of children over one-size-fits-all, and valuing a multiplicity of answers, approaches, and experiences, our task is to make a culturally sustaining stance explicit.

## **Epilogue: Justice In and Beyond Schools**

Attending to the long view of an ongoing struggle and journey, theoretical tools of analysis and critique can help progressive educators shift the racialized school reform debates from a focus on individual accountability to the structural solutions we need (Anyon, 2005b; Ladson-Billings, 2006). What is at stake is even greater than the ways in which corporate reform of the content, structures, and accountability systems in public education harms the children those reformers claim they want to help. Gee (2012) suggested a way to reframe the “crisis” in education:

On the face of the matter, the real “literacy crisis” would seem to be a crisis of social justice rooted in the fact that we supply less good schools and neighborhoods and less resourced homes to poorer and more disadvantaged people, and better ones to more mainstream and advantaged people. (p. 32)

This assessment of the “crisis” calls up Jean Anyon’s vision of a new social movement. Trying to simply improve schools without addressing the impact of the political economy on urban educational systems will never succeed. Anyon (2005a) described the “synergy” that could happen “if curricular and pedagogical reforms were coupled with financial and social support of students outside of school” (p. 184). She argued that organizing a new social movement with education at the center “can expose the combined effects of public policies, and highlight not only poor schools but the entire nexus of constraints on urban families” (p. 177). Through relationship building and coalition building with other progressive, critical, and radical educators, parents, and activists, we can contest structural racism and poverty and make social, political, economic, and educational change happen on large and small scales.<sup>8</sup>

Radical possibility can begin with one child, one teacher, one school at a time. While progressive pedagogies are not inherently culturally sustaining, the potential is there. As the story of Town Square School shows, progressive educators must actively engage with theories that help us reenvision developmentally appropriate, child-centered, and constructivist practices and consciously reposition how we think about teaching and learning within a sociocultural and sociopolitical frame of understanding. Through collaborative work, dialogue, and reflection that honor the progressive tradition and then push it forward, educators can dare to imagine and enact critical constructivist pedagogies that will better meet all children and youth where they are, honor what they bring, and empower them to change, strengthen, and sustain our cultures, schools, and communities.

## Appendix A: Webliography

Webliography of selected social justice/culturally sustaining/critical teaching and learning resources:

- [Rethinking Schools](#) (books and articles about social justice teaching, learning, and curricula)

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8 To my colleagues, mentors, and friends from Bank Street and the Graduate Center and to the educators in my family who pushed my thinking and writing in this paper, thank you. You continue to challenge my assumptions and understandings and inspire me to imagine solidarities of radical possibility.

- [Teacher Activist Groups](#) (local and national groups of teachers engaging in educational justice work; social justice teaching materials)
- [Teaching a People's History: Zinn Education Project](#) (books, articles, websites, teaching guides, and more)
- [Teaching Tolerance: Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education](#) (a free online PD seminar with four one-hour modules; many other Teaching Tolerance curricular resources)
- [Annenberg Institute for School Reform Voices in Urban Education](#) (summer 2012 issue focused on Education for Liberation)
- [Teaching for Change](#) (books, teaching resources, websites)
- [The ArtsLiteracy Project](#) (handbook of ideas, protocols, activities)
- [Facing History and Ourselves](#) (teaching materials and PD)
- [IndyKids](#) (free current events/social justice newspaper by kids, for kids with teaching guides and resources)
- [People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#) (Undoing Racism workshops)

## Appendix B: Bibliography

Bibliography of selected articles and books that bridge theory and practice for educators wanting to engage in social justice/culturally sustaining/critical teaching and learning:

- Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix (Ladson-Billings, 2014)
- Using Their Words: Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design for the Elementary Classroom (Picower, 2012)
- Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education (Hackman, 2005)
- The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children (Ladson-Billings, 2009)
- Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School (Pollock, Ed., 2008)
- The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008)
- A Reason to Read: Linking Literacy and the Arts (Landay & Wooten, 2012)
- Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves (Edwards & Derman-Sparks, 2010)
- We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools (Howard, 2006)
- Rethinking Multicultural Education: Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice (Au, Ed., 2009)

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# Say That The River Turns: Social Justice Intentions in Progressive Public School Classrooms

*Beatrice S. Fennimore*

“Say that the River turns, and turn the River.”

—Gwendolyn Brooks

In her poem “The Sermon on the Warpland,” Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks (2006) gently describes the powerful resistance that is necessary for social change. First, we must *say* that the change can take place—then we must make it happen. Progressive teachers in public schools face many frustrations and disappointments; nonetheless, they can adopt the message of this poem. How? First they can construct a language of belief that change can always take place—and then they can work to create the change to which they aspire. This essay will argue that such language and accompanying action must rest on the personal development of a well-articulated professional *intention* to see the progressive possibilities for social justice and change for common good in daily classroom life. This intention is first enacted in the ways in which the teacher chooses to speak about children and then further reflected in the power and purpose of the teacher’s professional actions.

## Standing Up to Pervasive Negativity

I start with some of the comments I have overheard many times in schools:

*“All the children in this school are at risk.”*

*“Our children come from homes that do not value education.”*

*“The kids who are poor lack the entry skills to be successful in school.”*

*“The struggling readers will just continue to fall behind.”*

Many public school educators are familiar with statements such as those, which reflect stress and frustration as well as the unfortunate denigrating and discriminatory attitudes that continue to persist in the context of schooling. It might be tempting to simply blame and criticize the teachers who make such comments, but in truth they are expressing thoughts that are pervasive in society and even found in some widely read educational resources (Borich, 2014; Payne, 1998; Rothstein,

2004). The stressful current trend of widespread criticism of teachers as well as the pressure on them to produce high scores on standardized tests can inadvertently foster or increase teachers' scapegoating of children with economic and social challenges.

In spite of making such comments, the speakers may well consider themselves to be good and fair teachers and view those words as “just talking”—but where are their articulated and internalized intentions to promote social justice in every aspect of their professional lives? Why aren't they reflecting carefully on the power they do have to “turn the River” of bias and discrimination that can do so much harm in schools? This essay is written to explore the power of teacher intentions and elaborate on the ways in which social justice intentions can be fully integrated into the praxis of progressive public school teachers.

## **Linking the Progressive Movement to Social Justice Commitments**

The progressive movement in the United States “enlisted the enthusiasm, the loyalty, the imagination, and the energy of large segment of the American public and the teaching profession” (Cremin, 1959, p. 22) to embrace the ideal of democracy in the context of a newly developing urban-industrial civilization. During the transformational Progressive Era, public schools were called upon to play their part in a much larger humanitarian reform movement taking place in the political and social life of the United States. At the forefront were the needs of immigrants; many schools became social centers providing services to thousands of immigrant children and adults (Spring, 2008).

As Cremin (1959) notes, John Dewey, a prominent figure in the Progressive Era, had a vision of education that was “appropriate to a democratic society” (p. 24) and that equipped all people to live their lives with intelligence and sensitivity to others. Although the progressive education movement is considered to have ended with the collapse of the Progressive Education Association in 1955 (Cremin, 1959), it is credited with the contributing substantial gains in increasing educational equity in the United States (Anyon, 2009).

How are the ideas of progressive education enacted in schools? That occurs when active inquiry and creative reflection are integral components of intellectually and socially engaging classrooms in which children learn to link the importance of academic pursuits with the equally important quality of their relationships with others. The students thus internalize empathy and compassion, leading to authentically cooperative behaviors in their classroom communities. Such progressive skills and intentions lay the groundwork for future citizenship because children become astute problem solvers in the context of democratic community life in the schoolroom (Reese, 2013). It is in the

spirit of inquiry, collaboration, and common purpose that progressive classrooms establish the foundation for adult commitments to socially just communities.

## **What Do We Mean by Social Justice?**

Social justice, simply put, is a public intention to enact fundamental respect for the dignity and human rights of every person. Progressive educators oriented toward social justice continually seek to uphold the common good as responsible citizens in their professional institutions and social communities (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). Importantly, a commitment to social justice requires all educators to recognize when those who should be served fully and ethically by our profession are instead experiencing discrimination and denial of an equal educational opportunity (Rawls, 1971) and then to take determined action to rectify the inequality. Social justice for progressive educators is a habit of mind and action; they know that social justice is either an enacted virtue “or it is a fraud.” (Novak, 2000, p. 11). They thus accept their responsibility to be transparent and articulate in their commitments and beliefs — and to act on them publicly.

## **Social Justice is Controversial**

Social justice is a politically controversial concept; its presence in teacher education has raised past concerns significant enough to motivate the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education to remove social justice language from its documents (Wilson, 2005). The major concern expressed by “conservatives” was that social justice in teacher education embodied a potentially coercive “liberal” bias that could interfere with first amendment rights and academic freedom. Students in teacher education programs might be forced to adopt (or pretend to adopt) liberal views in order to pass classes and receive certification (Wasley, 2006). Some critics of a social justice approach to teacher education also claimed that it was replacing a focus on traditional academic subjects (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

How might progressive educators respond to such concerns? First, they can make the case that social justice commitments are fully aligned with all the expectations laid out for educators in professional codes of ethics (Feeny & Freeman, 2005; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005; Strike & Soltis, 2004). Further, they can argue that all teachers in the United States have a civic responsibility to uphold the constitutional principles of liberty and equality in our democracy. Public schools in the United States are charged with the enactment of democratic practices; teachers do not leave their citizenship at the school door. Their responsibility for the

well-being of every one of their students means that they must be particularly mindful of civil protections, laws, and rights (Swadener, 2003). It can thus be argued that social justice transcends partisan politics and political party allegiance; it is a universal responsibility of citizenship, neither liberal nor conservative. All educators (like all citizens in a democracy) are called upon to demonstrate their intention to respect human rights and to act in service of the common good (Fennimore, 2014). Any claims that a focus on social justice is replacing traditional subjects in school reflect a great misunderstanding. Social justice commitments complement the curriculum and make it more likely that all children will have access to an outstanding academic education. My stance is that incorrect beliefs about the role of social justice in education must be strongly countered whenever possible.

## **Controversy in Teacher Praxis**

Social justice can be controversial in teacher praxis as well; teachers who are outspoken in their advocacy for children may not always fit in well with the cultural norm of their school. How often, after all, do teachers hold open and frank conversations with their colleagues about what is right, fair, and ethical? How often do educators in schools acknowledge the ways in which society as a whole is failing to nurture and protect the developmental needs of all children? Such considerations of the moral dimensions of teaching can seem uncomfortable or controversial (Sockett, 1993). Teachers have often told me that they veer away from discussing issues related to social justice (particularly in connection to racism and forms of prejudice and discrimination) because they fear that their opinions may be misinterpreted or might inadvertently offend others. Progressive teachers whose talk and actions openly reflect their social justice intentions may indeed be moving out of the comfort zone of what is considered conventional conversation in their schools. In spite of this, however, I believe that their efforts are a major step toward countering the damage that can be done by biased or even callous lack of regard for children whose life experiences are very difficult.

## **Deficit-Based Teacher Talk, Ethics, and Social Justice Intentions**

The opposite of discourse reflecting social justice commitments is the deficit-based talk that can be prevalent in schools, particularly those serving socially marginalized populations. I hear this talk often while supervising school-based field experiences; teachers will make comments such as “most of these kids will end up in jail” or “the kind of student population I teach could not possibly do the work the gifted kids do.” When I reflect on such talk, I realize that it is possible for teachers

to consider themselves to be dedicated professionals while failing to see the connection between discriminatory, disparaging talk and real harm to children. In fact, however, teachers are never “just talking”—talk is an action and a behavior that makes things happen and continue to happen (Austin, 1962; Searle 1969). Negative talk and deficit-based labeling represent enacted generalized assumptions of students’ inferiority that interfere with the rights of all children to be welcomed and respected in their public schools. Such comments reinforce bias, negativity, and hopelessness in other listeners; they make it more likely that some children will be continue to be marginalized and neglected in schools. When we think of this kind of teacher talk as an action, we can see why it merits careful consideration from the standpoint of professional ethics—particularly the ethic that no child should be harmed in the process of education (Strike & Soltis, 2004).

This is why the refreshingly and determined positive talk of effective progressive public school educators should be thought of as an intentional extension of professional ethics. Because these teachers *intend* to consistently promote social justice in public schools, they use their words in ways that construct ethical possibilities. In the development of their intentionality, progressive public school educators identify what they consider to be irreducible in their professional stance. Their intention to seek equity and fairness in the context of articulated professional power and responsibility is reflective but nonnegotiable. Their talk is an action unto itself and also leads strongly into further action—the moral matching of words and deeds that gives authenticity and integrity to the work of the best progressive educators.

## **An Example of Ethical Talk and Action**

My former student Diana<sup>1</sup> is a now a kindergarten teacher in a public elementary school serving a highly diverse student population. She considers the climate of the school to be a significant professional challenge; Diana consistently hears her colleagues and administrators express negative attitudes toward certain children and families. Committed to a progressive approach to these challenges, she has constructed ways of infusing those commitments into her responses to colleagues who demean or complain about the children and families served by the school.

For example, her principal recently told her that she was “going to have to accept one of those halfway house kids” in her classroom. Diana was actually very interested in the welfare of the children in the nearby halfway house; they lived with single mothers recently released from prison

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1 All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.



who were being assisted in finding jobs and homes. Sensing a negative administrative tone, she said, “I really appreciate the chance to help this child as much as I can—and this is another good opportunity to help my class to focus on welcoming newcomers to our classroom community.” Diana followed up on those words with action.

When the child arrived, she greeted him warmly and held his hand while walking him to the classroom and introduced him with enthusiasm to other teachers standing in the hall. For the next few weeks, while she made every effort to support the child’s academic and emotional progress, Diana also made a point of sharing the child’s successful development with the principal and her colleagues. When negative comments such as “I don’t know why we have to get kids like that in this school” were made, Diana’s response was consistently positive: “I really like this child and I am so glad to have him in my class.” She accepts the fact that she sometimes receives negative responses to her positive comments; she sees value in her intentions and efforts regardless of a resistant or unkind response. She also seeks to implement progressive educational strategies in her classroom that strengthen the children most at risk of being weakened by institutional bias. Through her own progressive actions, Diana models inclusiveness and acceptance of differences for her colleagues and for all the children in her classroom.

## **Say That the River Turns**

The challenges faced by progressive teachers must be recognized; advocacy and activism for children can be difficult. This seems to be particularly true today, when teachers are faced with the significant social and economic problems that confront their students and their students’ families as well as with constant public criticism. Many of those who find fault with public school teachers simply do not understand the incredibly complex social context in which those teachers work daily.

Government leaders and policy makers who criticize teachers may only *read* about those who live in poverty in the United States. Many teachers, however, conduct their professional lives in close daily relationship with children whose impoverished life circumstances have deeply troubling ramifications. Poverty constitutes human suffering (Noguera, 2008) that can manifest itself in exhaustion, fear, hunger, emotional distress, and lack of access to basic health-related services. We expect teachers to be compassionate and fair in a society that often seems to be neither. Quite a few critics engage in the hypocrisy of blaming teachers alone for low standardized test scores while conveniently ignoring the significant implications of widespread poverty and grossly underfunded public schools (Apple, 2009).

My former student Ajani, for example, is now teaching in a school serving children living in a high-poverty rural community. He recently told me about a child in his class who was in agony with a toothache for a number of days; the child sometimes wept uncontrollably and continually pressed his hands into his face. Ajani was troubled by the daily suffering of this child—how could he not be? The children in the class were concerned as well; they tried to comfort and help their friend. Ajani advocated with the school nurse, the guidance counselor, and the principal to help him seek relief and dental care for the child. Unfortunately, in spite of everyone’s intervention, the suffering child had to wait a few days for an itinerant dentist—the only one willing to serve patients on Medicaid—to return to the community.

In spite of this difficult situation, Ajani continued to teach daily with compassion and enthusiasm. His resilience and commitment to social justice sustained him as he taught, tried to support the child in pain, and worked to engage the children in productive learning experiences while he modeled the importance of helping and caring about others.

Progressive public school educators like Ajani, faced with seemingly intractable social problems, nonetheless remain dauntless; they “say that the River turns” with words and actions that reflect their powerful intentions to enact social justice every day. No matter how serious the problems may be, progressive educators acknowledge that something can always be done. Their commitment to social justice inspires their coherent intellectual approach to education—one that acknowledges but does not give in to the difficult social and political problems that deeply affect teaching, learning, and schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

## **Progressivism Today**

It is the narrative of the promise of democracy, deeply woven into multiple layers of the Progressive Era (Popkewitz, 2011) that is closely linked to social justice commitments of teachers today. Such a focus, then and now, is on the assurance (however elusive) of equal respect and equal opportunity in a society characterized by the absence of class distinctions (Reese, 2013). Democracy is always a complex and sometimes contradictory undertaking; proponents of progressivism and social justice alike experience the tensions and conflicts inherent in balancing individual rights with responsibilities to serve the common good. Teachers with progressive social justice commitments today might mirror the belief of pioneer social worker Jane Addams (as cited in Cremin, 1959, p. 22) that “good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class.”

Progressivism is still at the heart of classrooms where teachers seek the multifaceted positive growth of every child in the context of her or his wholeness of identity and experience. Preparation for citizenship in a democratic society continues to be central to children's intellectual and social development; the school must support children in forming an understanding of their place in fair and just communities (Reese, 2013). Schools and teachers therefore play an important role in transforming systemic oppression into systemic equality (James, 2010). It is the construction of fair and equitable school environments, combined with powerful modeling by progressive teachers, which can give children in even the most impoverished circumstances hope in the possibilities of the future (Weiler, 2004).

### **An Example in the Classroom**

How might progressive teachers enact such lofty progressive goals in their classrooms? I return now to Diana and her new student from the negatively viewed halfway house. Diana knew full well that she would have serious democracy-building work to do with her class after she welcomed the new student to their classroom. Several teachers and school parents had previously complained to the superintendent about enrolling children from the halfway house, and Diana suspected that some of her students were aware of this.

She realized that her progressive commitments to social justice in this situation were inherently political as well as educational; she considered it her responsibility to use spaces of freedom in her classroom to model inclusive respect and to teach principles of good citizenship related to the larger goals of democratic social reforms (Weiler, 2004). Although she had always worked hard to create a classroom community where fairness was valued, Diana anticipated some potential social challenges with the inclusion of her new student and planned to confront them in positive and interesting ways.

When she introduced the new student to her class, Diana told the children that it was a wonderful day to welcome a new friend because they were all going to plant seeds in a new window box for their classroom. She explained that all the seeds depended for their care and growth on everyone working together for the next few weeks. Each seed, just like each child in the class, was different—but each one needed good cooperative friends to help it grow. Her new student was placed in one of the groups of “gardening friends” that would report daily on the progress of the seeds. Diana observed the social interactions of her class carefully over the next few days and facilitated inclusiveness whenever possible.

One day, she overheard a child say something to a classmate about “that kid from the prison house” during the class’s free time. Diana walked over to join in that conversation, asking the two children about their activity. As they talked, Diana reinforced her commitment as a teacher to a wonderful classroom community where all friends were welcomed. Later in the day, she redesigned a music activity so each child would partner at some time with all the others in movement. She read several children’s books to the class that focused on dimensions of friendship and inclusion in the context of human difference.

Diana was sad when the child suddenly moved to a different state a few months later, but she felt that she, her students, and the child had experienced positive growth in the context of a progressive and social justice approach to their time together in her classroom. Much of what she did might seem simply like good teaching, but in fact there were many other choices Diana might have made that could have fostered less inclusion and possibly greater reinforcement of unfriendly attitudes toward the child. For example, she might have just ignored the negative comment that she overheard or commented in the teachers’ room that she felt that the presence of the child was creating a disruption in the social life of her classroom. She could have acted on deficit-based beliefs that caused her to focus more on the child’s challenges than on his strengths. It was Diana’s well-established intentions that led her to take advantage of every opportunity to reinforce progressive principles of fairness and equal acceptance and opportunity in her classroom.

## **The Progressive Social Justice Stance**

All teachers have a stance; it is important that they know what it is and, if necessary, strengthen it with democratic intentions. Progressive public school educators should thus make the sociopolitical natures of their schools apparent, and deliberate “about strategies to negotiate on behalf of students who are marginalized” (Boutte & Jackson, 2014, p. 625). Not unlike the alienated radicals of the progressive movement in the 1920s, educators who accept their personal responsibility to stand up for equality and social justice in school and society may at times find themselves discredited by some in power or some who simply disagree with their beliefs (Weiler, 2004). Thus it is empowering for them to embrace Freire’s transformational concept of *conscientização*, through which progressive educators are called upon to develop a “process of social introspection and self-reflectivity” (Torres, 2008, p. 8) that creates the personal space for them to have the courage and resilience to persist in their commitments. Essential to teacher reflectivity is the ability to question one’s own actions as

well as those of others, and “to develop a permanent ethical attitude of epistemological and ethical self-vigilance” (Torres, 2008, p. 8).

It is important to remember that ethics require us to pose questions of ourselves in situations where both right and wrong can be done (Fennimore, 2014). Self-righteousness has no place in progressive social justice commitments; personal humility and vigilance of ethical thought and action is essential. Progressivism, like democracy itself, represents a form of social and personal struggle. For dedicated educators, this struggle can also be characterized as a hopeful and powerful infusion of fairness and justice into the lives of all children served in the public schools.

## **An Example of Progressivism in the Classroom**

How might the embodiment of historical progressivism look in a classroom today? I return to Ajani, whose student had to wait so long for the dental care he needed so badly. That experience made Ajani more aware of the shortage of medical resources for those experiencing economic poverty in his school community. He spoke to his principal and some of his colleagues about the situation, but he was told that other than making referrals to social services, nothing more could be done. This bothered Ajani, and he kept thinking about what might be an ethical response to the situation. Although he realized that there was no immediate way that he personally could alleviate the shortage of medical services in the community, he felt that it would be wrong to let things go at that. He decided to turn his concern into preparing his students to be citizens whose voices could serve the common good in their present and future community.

Linking a social studies lesson on government and citizenship with an English language arts lesson on letter writing, Ajani first talked with his students about the responsibility of all the people in a community to help one another. He said, “When we think about everyone in our community, we create nicer and safer places in which we all can live.” He engaged his students in a discussion about ways in which they could help their school community; the students focused on being nice to people in the lunchroom and not pushing. They started a campaign and hung posters about it on their bulletin board in the hallway. Later, Ajani extended the lesson into thinking about the larger community and what might make things better there; after discussing the need for more help for people who were sick, his students all wrote letters to the mayor, suggesting that more medical services be provided in the community. The children were excited when the mayor wrote back to them; she indicated that she had been looking into federal funding for a community center for just that purpose.

In the teachers' room, Ajani shared the work his students had done and the letter from the mayor. A few of his colleagues talked with him about ways to infuse concern about the school and surrounding community into their own classrooms. Although of course those outcomes were not major solutions to a serious problem, they were nonetheless small steps forward that started with intentions that led to actions that helped progressive teachers and students alike to see themselves as important actors in a world that needed their caring, their kindness, and their active concern for the common good.

## Rewriting the Sentences!

*"Some of the children in this school are placed at risk by poverty, but all the children who attend this school are respected and encouraged to reach for success."*

*"We are not always able to engage families as much as we hope to, but we continually reach out to support them in their concern about their children's educational well-being."*

*"We are aware of some of the research and writing that predicts inevitable cumulative school failure in children who are poor, but we refuse to allow it to dampen our enthusiastic encouragement of every child."*

*"We do have some children who struggle with difficulties in this school, but we continue to employ every possible strategy to help them make continual progress."*

For committed progressive public school educators, advocacy for children is the protective tent that covers their enthusiastic efforts on behalf of their students (Fennimore, 2014). These remarkable teachers acknowledge that their work is not easy and know that their ethical and civil social justice intentions rarely bring about immediate change. They are nonetheless infusing a resilient energy into their schools and classrooms; for their students as well as their colleagues, they are powerful role models of resistance to injustice. In their own way and their own time, progressive public school educators do indeed *say that the River turns*, and they do *turn the River* toward justice, equality, democracy, and the common good.

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# A Humanizing Approach to Improving School Disciplinary Culture

*Darrick Smith*

Teachers, administrators, students, and families must ask themselves if a school's disciplinary policies and practices exist for the purposes of exerting power over their students or if they exist to foster positive and holistic human development. This article summarizes the steps that one school took to establish a culture in which everyone in the school community could respect, honor, and embrace the boundaries and ethics of the school's approach to discipline.

The frameworks mentioned here were primarily formulated to address teacher and administrative gaps in school-to-community communication and fundamental understandings of community expectations and norms regarding student behavior. Building on the notions of critical pedagogy and social justice leadership, efforts articulated here were enacted with the intent to create a space in which students and staff could experience their school as more safe and empowering (Brown, 2006; Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Theoharis, 2007). As a member of the school's administration, I was privileged to be a part of the process.

Discipline policies at many U.S. schools enact varied institutional responses to student misbehavior, but studies show that Black and Latino students are more likely to experience harsh punitive consequences such as suspension and expulsion (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Monroe, 2006; Welch & Payne, 2010). Researchers note schools' use of metal detectors, I.D. cards, and an increase in armed, on-campus officers to address what is a perceived problem with school safety as contributing components to an atmosphere of "zero tolerance" that exacerbates racially disproportionate disciplinary outcomes for students of color (Astor et al., 2005; Robers, Kemp, & Truman, 2013).

In response to such outcomes, scholars have continued to advocate for the need for cultural relevance and responsiveness as a way to engage students in the schooling experience, build relationships with teachers, and help them make sense of their lives (Gay, 2003; Howard, 2012; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This discourse has led to a renewed interest in the issue of school discipline and the development of more humanizing disciplinary frameworks such as positive behavioral and intervention supports (Skiba, et al, 2002; Sugai & Horner, 2002) authoritative

discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), restorative justice (Hopkins, 2003; Karp & Breslin, 2001) and other practices and policies that critique a zero tolerance approach (Martinez, 2009; Stein, 2003; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riesenber, 2006).

However, the quality of these frameworks is dependent on the fidelity and sincerity with which they are implemented. Without a grounding in a purpose and an environment that emphasizes ethics and practices that values students as developing human beings that need boundaries and respect, school discipline practices can manifest in destructive practices often as a result of a non-reflective, uncritical, institutional culture.

## **The Small Equity School**

The Small Equity School (SES), a small urban high school with a strong social justice mission, reflects many of the struggles around discipline in its efforts to create a positive and empowering learning environment for students and staff. Located in the San Francisco Bay Area, SES is known for its diversity and rich history of popular political involvement. It began in 2003 on the campus of a large public university and has since moved to its current setting in a diverse working-class community.

The student body is composed of about 280 students in grades nine to twelve. In terms of racial diversity, approximately 53% of students are Latino/a, 27% African-American, 11% Asian-American, 3% Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/American Indian, 3% White-American, and 1% multiracial. SES has the second highest proportion of students of color of any high school in the district, and over 85% of students qualify as low-income.

SES had a well-developed social justice curriculum already in place, a democratic decision-making structure, a college-readiness program, and a health center on campus that effectively provided counseling to students and connected them with critical off-campus resources. The social justice theme of the school and the corresponding ideologies held by staff upon hire set a foundation that, at the very least, discouraged challenges to ideas of equity, resistance, and cultural congruence. However, as supportive as these assets were, they were not enough to ensure that the school was a safe or healthy space for students.

## Humanization

As the newer of two leaders in a dual-principal structure at SES, I was asked to take on the task of “re-culturing” (Barth, 2002) the space to address issues of habitual tardiness, disrespect of school staff, and an unsafe environment for students, which included violent conflicts, objectifying language, and bullying. While less than 25% of the school’s population were African-American girls, 90% of the suspensions were African-American girls. The school also had experienced a consistent decline in test scores for the six years previous to the start of the efforts described in this paper. This culminated in the school having the lowest test scores of any high school in the district at the time these coordinated efforts at “re-culturing” began.

Students were routinely sent out of their classrooms for disciplinary infractions, yet there were no clear expectations about what was supposed to happen afterwards. These problems were not just individual mistakes; as routine elements of the school’s culture they represented a collective ethic that demonstrated a low set of expectations for students (Landsman, 2004). These low expectations were also manifested in the lack of a clear structure for school discipline and a professional development plan that excluded any opposition to the staff and faculty’s assumptions regarding students’ cultural or community deficiencies (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Valencia, 2012). As a result, my communications with my school community framed our focus on social justice as a manifestation of ethics and practices that must first be *humanizing*.

Paulo Freire defines humanization as “the act of becoming more fully human” (Freire, 2000, p. 2). Freire identifies forces and mechanisms of oppression as instruments that interrupt the process of humanization, leading to what he calls “dehumanization,” or the loss of one’s humanity. In understanding this concept, educators interested in social justice must first contextualize their work as diametrically opposed to oppressive forces and mechanisms. Oppression manifests as threats from forces outside the body and within. As communities struggle with disproportionately high arrest rates, incarceration rates, and dynamics of school “push-out”, they also may struggle with high rates of assault, homicide, and sexual harassment- forms of intra-group violence. As educators engage in efforts that seek to empower students to change their reality and improve their personal and communal situation, it is important that they recognize the dual threat of external and internalized oppression. With this in mind, in addition to helping students develop a structural analysis of oppression, teachers must locate the struggle against oppression as one that takes place in the consciousness of the student (Akom, 2006; Morrell, 2002; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).



Early notions of progressive education also identified educators' work as developing individuals for a larger purpose and saw the school as a space for social reform (Bohan, 2003; Reese, 2001; Cremin, 1959). John Dewey states:

That the traditional schools have almost wholly evaded consideration of the social potentialities of education is no reason why progressive schools should continue the evasion.... the time ought to come when no one will be judged to be an educated man or woman who does not have insight into the basic forces of industrial and urban civilization. Only schools which take the lead in bringing about this kind of education can claim to be progressive in any socially significant sense. (Dewey, 1980)

Viewing education as a space for human development and approaching school discipline with the intent to provide a humanizing experience is an inherently progressive concept (Kohn, 2008; Covalleskie, 1994; Dewey, 1980). As a tradition, progressive education is a philosophy that informs an educational experience that prepares students more for democratic citizenship than for participation as laborers in a market economy (Dewey, 2007; Dewey, 2004; Reese, 2001). At its core, the early formulations of progressive education suggested that children and students be seen and prioritized as the focus of curriculum development and school design (Bohan, 2003; Kohn, 2008). Without exaggerating this idea, a humanizing approach to discipline focuses on the needs of the child as a developing, social being.

It is through the development of “discipline,” Dewey asserted, that students would learn and continue to develop a sense of “self-direction.” Discipline is an essential component of a functioning democracy and becomes the very characteristic that allows a citizen to exercise freedom through deliberate action and an awareness of the social dynamics in which they live. He writes:

A person who is trained to consider his actions, to undertake them deliberately, is in so far forth disciplined. Add to this ability a power to endure in an intelligently chosen course in [the] face of distraction, confusion, and difficulty, and you have the essence of discipline. Discipline means power at command; mastery of the resources available for carrying through the action undertaken (2004, p. 135).

Creating a humanizing school disciplinary culture at SES meant being rooted in the desire to affirm students as powerful human beings from resilient and impactful communities. Our boundaries, expectations, and practices would reflect an acknowledgement that our students' families held the highest of hopes and expectations for their children. We began the process of creating a humanizing

space by (1) establishing a clear mission statement; (2) aligning our values to the mission; (3) establishing consistency in the discipline process; and (4) developing courage through staff and faculty ability to deal with confrontation.

## **Developing a Clear Mission Statement**

Once a school's purpose of social, economic, political and cultural significance has been established and attendant values are agreed upon, school leaders must disseminate this agenda to students and their families with clarity, consistency, and courage. The Small Equity School developed a new school mission statement:

We believe that a school for social justice should maintain a staunch opposition to oppression in both its conventional and internalized forms. We believe that we all must be held accountable in regards to our voice and daily action to uphold ethics emblematic of a proud struggle against the destruction of our communities.

The specific language used in this mission statement highlights a few key strategies. First, the use of the word “we” is important because it creates a school community that acknowledges the socio-political, economic, spiritual, and mortal struggles of our families and our student's families. Second, this mission is not limited to students' academic success and college acceptance. Third, as a central premise of social justice education, members of the school community are accountable for their daily behavior. Finally, the mission omits a reference to students as it implies that these values are to be held by all who have chosen to be a part of school community—from custodians to directors. This is a key element of a transformative leadership approach—a clear vision that implies the need to model a set of ethics: “To change the culture requires that more desirable qualities replace existing unhealthy elements. Clear personal and collective visions are crucial for this enterprise” (Barth, 2002, p. 2).

## **Aligning Values to the Mission**

After establishing and sharing a clear mission statement, it is important to align the values to the mission. These values have to be culturally responsive and should not be embarrassing or irrelevant to students when verbalized or shared with peers outside of school. They need to be easy to apply to the daily lives of students, thus enhancing their significance and the authenticity of the school as a viable learning space. In the SES, the values are connected to the specific mission of challenging

internalized oppression and holding community members accountable. The “RICH” values were articulated as follows:

1. Respect – Earned and given before received
2. Integrity – Your work, or no work. What’s right is what is most difficult.
3. Courage – To stand up to/face your fears, and your peers.
4. Humility – You don’t know everything—no one does.

A senior student talked about the new values:

RICH! It was something you had to know. Then it turned into something to model. Then it was like, “Okay I can set values for anything in my life and for everything in my life.” And this doesn’t just apply in school.

The school values were presented first and foremost as values for dealing with the challenges of an economically and racially stratified social structure. This served to validate the values and help the entire community manifest them at all times. The school-community link was the beginning of a comprehensive approach to messaging about the school and making sure that each idea and ethic was connected to a practice that was in turn connected back to the vision. Establishing a clear connection between vision and daily practice was a critical step in beginning to build trust, which is essential for school culture change (Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemmings, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The stated values were important in demonstrating the connection between knowledge earned at school and its utility in the community, and parents were also pleased that these values corresponded to community values.

The school’s mission was put into practice in school assemblies, which provided communal instruction in accordance with our mission of challenging oppression and upholding our values. These forums for school-wide gatherings and messaging were important because they accessed the multiple learning styles present in such a large community. Activities included showing popular films and excerpts from musical selections and videos in order to simultaneously frame the school’s purpose and strengthen a sense of identity. Using audio-visual media helped students move easily from a space of visual stimulation to a space of visual *and* mental stimulation when guided with purpose and engaging, contextualized readings and exercises. Assemblies were also used for traditional school announcements and performances, but the performance element was reduced to make time for these exercises and activities.

Consistent messages about the mission were reinforced in advisory (also known as a homeroom class). The advisory curriculum was altered to include a deeper exploration of the school's values and the ideological, socio-historical, and political context of the mission statement. For example, the school's values of respect and integrity were discussed within the context of liberation pedagogy and critical inquiry. The school's College Access Director commented on the approach, saying "it all helped me formulate a language around school change and how that can trickle down to student's development."

## **Consistency in the Discipline Process**

Once the mission and values were solidified, school policies could be implemented that aligned closely with the values, and the nuances of the school's discipline process could be created and reinforced. New consistent discipline practices were implemented to provide more consistency and improve the school climate.

At SES, school leaders were historically concerned about the racially disproportionate suspension rate that reflected the national epidemic referred to as the discipline gap" (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Many students sent to the office who had committed an obvious offense to the community found it difficult to apologize. They found the idea of apology an indicator of weakness or a sign of eternal subservience.

The new discipline process was referred to as "Atonement or At Home-ment." It was simple. If a violation of school policy occurred that was non-violent in nature a student had the following options:

1. After a private conversation with the supervising adult that clarifies the nature of the violation and why it is unacceptable, the student can return to their daily schedule and make amends with whomever the adult identifies as suitable.
2. The student can request further clarification from the administrator about why what they did was a problem. This is also a time for a longer, more contextualized conversation about the purpose of the school in a socio-historical context and the value of the student in that vision. The student can also explain why someone else needs to atone in the situation. This includes students and teachers who may have unnecessarily insulted the student or instigated the incident.

3. The student can refuse to atone to anyone and be suspended. There is an in-depth discussion between the administrator, student, and any other party that would take place either before the suspension or once the student returns to school.

If the student's offense is violent in nature, there is an automatic suspension. For situations of a violent nature, students who were suspended for violence three times in two years would often be recommended for transfer out of the school. Students who presented a threat to the student body through the use of excessive violence or perpetual drug possession or conspicuous gang affiliation would also be transferred.

## **Confrontation and Courage**

Initially, SES's plan for a new discipline policy that was grounded in the school's RICH values sounded ridiculous. The staff did not think that it would work or that it would reduce suspensions. However, the reduction in suspensions was not the primary goal. Instead, the goal was to teach students effectively and create a safe school environment.

Teachers and staff were asked to invest time and energy to study the history of the community they served and a commitment to learning different ways to engage students. For our staff and faculty, this meant consistently confronting students when they violated the community's expectations while also being apologetic when misunderstandings or mistakes occurred on their own part. As one staff member commented:

You can look at a teacher who is being authoritative in a classroom, is managing the classroom, and is setting down reasons and giving consequences. I think a lot of people come from this youth development approach in social justice work where you see that as innately harmful to the child. I think that what our staff didn't have was a framework for what it meant or looked like to be an authority figure that didn't represent oppression.

A humanities teacher also commented:

Like there was a student that constantly betrayed people's trust, assaulted someone in one of the classrooms, steals from his advisor, gets high with one of the teachers, and did all of these blatant violations of our community. We still had so many people advocating for him to stay at the school. Which is where I decided that, okay, this is a really significant paradigm where within I didn't see anywhere in that

system where individual capability and responsibility, or ownership of your actions or any of that stuff was actually there.

Working with staff and faculty through consistent dialogue and reflective activities in and out of professional development sessions helped frame expectations for how staff can and should handle issues of student conduct in ways that still felt humanizing and supportive. Such work included standing with teachers as they conducted hallway conversations with students, having reflective conversations with teachers at the end of the school day regarding confrontations with students and how to handle them, and consistent and honest dialogue in staff meetings about what is and is not working for the staff collective regarding the school's disciplinary policies and procedures.

Identifiable improvements could be seen after three years of the new discipline policy. Between 2008 and 2011 SES experienced a dramatic reduction in suspensions, an increase in daily attendance, and increased test scores. School suspensions of African-American students decreased from 90% to just under 45%, and on average, fewer than 5 students out of an annual average of 42 suspended students were suspended more than once a year. Student attendance also increased each year. Daily overall attendance increased from 91% to 93% and attendance in classes or “instructional time” went up from 83% to 88%, earning the school a district award for improved attendance rates. Academically, the school experienced its first rise in test scores in seven years, with a net increase of 34 Academic Performance Index points over a three-year period.

Regardless of the quantifiable shifts in the disciplinary culture of the school, at the core of a humanizing environment are spaces and opportunities for healthy relationships that challenge students and staff alike to respect one another. In such an environment, boundaries can be upheld without guilt and flexibility can be institutionalized without the lowering of expectations. In the case of the SES, the creation of a mission statement, a related purpose, and aligned values was an important first step. The consistent and clear messaging that was infused throughout the school environment further reinforced the social justice mission to achieve a new disciplinary culture at SES.

## Steps to Improving School Disciplinary Culture Using a Humanizing Approach

1. A clear definition and articulation of social justice that emphasizes humanization through high behavioral expectations.
2. A usable set of values established for the collective that is connected to the social justice intent of the school.
3. Clearly articulated consequences for school violations and the rationale behind each as it relates to the social justice mission (as opposed to the state's rationale for instituting the code).
4. Professional development on the diverse communities in the school and their histories of conflict, resistance, and success.
5. Clear and easy-to-understand systems and processes for handling disciplinary issues.
6. Professional development on techniques that engage, confront, and resolve disciplinary issues.
7. Consistent, community-wide messaging to all stakeholders regarding the social justice-oriented purpose of the school, behavioral expectations, and disciplinary processes.

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# “We All is Teachers”: Emergent Bilingual Children at the Center of the Curriculum

Ysaaca Axelrod

It is 9:30 am and the children in the classroom have just finished describing to their teachers where they are going to play for their morning “work time.” Diego announces “*Yo cocino mucha comida, mucha comida para Flor y luego en área de bloques voy a hacer una casa*” (I am cooking lots of food, lots of food for Flor and then in the block area I am going to make a house). Marcelo says “*Yo voy a la casa a poner un doctor*” (I am going to the house to put on a doctor [outfit]), Javier chimes in “No, I am going to be the doctor, *¿esta bien?, yo sabo lo que hace un doctor* (Is that ok? I know what a doctor does). Soraya invites Luna to “*lavando un dirty dog, esta muy sucio*” (bathe a dirty dog that is very dirty).

After they describe their plans, they go off, sometimes to the area that they planned, and sometimes not. Within 5 minutes the classroom is humming with children playing, going across areas of the classrooms, switching back and forth between languages, while the teachers move around the classroom observing and joining children at play for the next hour. If a visitor stepped into this classroom, they would have a hard time finding the adults, instead it is the voices and bodies of busy children moving around that stand out in this space. (Field Notes, October 4, 2010)

These notes describe a 4-year-olds Head Start bilingual (Spanish/English) classroom in an immigrant neighborhood in New York City. The children are predominantly children of Dominican and Mexican immigrants. Most speak Spanish at home, but some of the Mexican families also speak Mixtec, an indigenous language. The children in this community are frequently labeled as “at risk” in schools because of their lack of language (i.e., lack of mainstream U.S. English), immigration status, race, or ethnicity.

Curricular practices are increasingly standardized with narrow definitions of language and literacy (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2010), and an increase in teacher-directed and -led instruction with little time and space for children to engage with and learn from their peers (Genishi & Dyson, 2012). However, at this Head Start program, the primary focus is on children’s socio-emotional development, using a play-based curriculum. The teachers see their role as nurturing language skills so that the children can learn how to communicate their feelings and

emotions in order to participate in the classroom community. Language and play are important tools for the children to learn and develop skills across all domains.

The Head Start teachers embrace “dynamic bilingualism” (García, 2009) in their own language practices and support the children’s translanguaging practices—or the way they move back and forth between languages, depending on the context and listeners. Dynamic bilingualism is a shift away from the idea of bilinguals possessing two separate language systems. It describes the complex language practices of bilingual speakers, and acknowledges that it the interrelationship between languages is expansive and evolving (García, 2009).

The teachers also view all of the children’s interactions with language and texts, and the tools used to create texts, as valuable emergent literacy practices, “an early version of an ability that will develop further over time” (Lindfors, 2008, p. 53). Children’s oral language, their play with texts (Axelrod, 2014a), and conversations with peers are seen as critical to their language and literacy development, in stark contrast to many classrooms that serve children who are labeled “at risk.”

John Dewey said, “The child is the starting point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard” (1902/1990, p. 187). The teachers in this Head Start program (while they did not refer to Dewey) embrace this philosophy by putting each child at the center of the curriculum and focusing on his or her individual development.

This article focuses on the possibilities and benefits of flexible curricular practices that build on children’s existing language skills, positioning the children as knowledgeable and active learners. It also recognizes the challenges of enacting classroom practices that take a stand against current thinking.

The data described here was collected as part of an ethnographic case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) that took place over the course of an academic year (September through July) in a Head Start classroom. I examined the language and literacy development and practices of emergent bilingual 4-year-olds and developed an understanding of the multiple factors that influenced the children’s language development, language policies in the school, curriculum, and teacher and family ideologies. I was particularly interested in how the children used language(s) to interact with peers, the ways in which they negotiated across their languages over time, in different contexts and with different people.

Data for the study was collected through classroom observations (3 to 4 times a week for the entire school day); formal interviews with the families, teachers and administrators (one hour long, twice during the study, conducted in language of choice, typically in Spanish, with families and teachers); a focus group interview with the families (all families were invited, six participated); an artifact collection of children's work (photographs); and countless informal conversations with families, teachers, administrators, and children (which were included in field notes).

There were 13 children in the classroom, all of whom participated in the study. Half of the children came from homes where the families spoke Mixtec (all but one also spoke Spanish at home), four (all identified as Mexican) spoke only Spanish at home, two (identified as Dominican) spoke both English and Spanish, and two children (one identified as Black, the other as African-American) spoke only English at home. Most of the children had attended the Head Start program the previous year as 3-year-olds.

The two teachers in the classroom were both immigrants, one from the Dominican Republic and one from Argentina. They both spoke Spanish and English, and were both mothers whose children had attended this Head Start program. I also interviewed the Head Start executive director and educational director. I had frequent informal conversations with Joan, the educational director, an African-American woman who was eager to hear about my research and share her experiences working in the program for over 30 years, and to describe the shifts that had taken place in the field of early childhood education during her career.

My role as a researcher was as a participant observer, moving across the continuum of participation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). During the study I also took on several other roles, alternating between researcher, teacher, and sometimes playmate. As a native English and Spanish speaker I was able to engage with the children and families in both languages, as well as recognize the dynamic nature of bilingualism.

Interviews with the families, teachers, and directors highlighted the complexities and challenges of having a play-based program that honored the children's language practices. Joan, the educational director, talked about the challenges the program faced with funders, the feedback about their students from the local elementary school, and families' expectations of what school should be like. She felt that the pressure to conform to the current "push-down, standard, English-only, reading and writing focus" was coming from all directions.

Teachers at the local elementary school said in interviews that they were concerned that the children who came from the Head Start program did not have many of the skills associated with kindergarten readiness, such as knowing letters and sounds, numbers, and shapes. They felt that the program should spend less time playing and more time preparing the children for kindergarten.

Joan had also heard these concerns; however, she was unwilling to compromise her belief in the importance of play for early childhood, and particularly for these children. She noted that given their race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status these children tended to attend low-performing elementary schools. These schools were under particular pressure to increase test scores, which often meant a standardized curriculum, increased teacher-directed instruction, and few opportunities for the children to play. “It doesn’t make sense,” she said, “children, all children, need to play, it’s how they learn.” She said that many families at first adopt the discourse of “kindergarten readiness” for their younger children. “But, then they come here, and they see the kids happy and engaged, and we can show them how they are learning. We need to teach families about the importance of play, so they recognize it too.”

Joan also felt strongly that Head Start’s practice was about honoring the children and their families’ linguistic practices. Joan identified as a language learner, since she spoke English and a bit of Spanish: “I don’t know if we are even called a bilingual program, we try to meet children where they are, I don’t know what to call us, a ‘considerate language program,’ it’s hard to explain.” The program’s goals around bilingual education were neither political nor “fashionable,” as Joan put it, rather a way to honor each child and their families’ language(s), and to help them develop them to support their future learning and endeavors. While Joan’s position was unwavering, the interviews with the families and teachers revealed more hesitancy.

The families were caught between the societal discourse around schooling and language and their personal experiences at the school. They were often confused about the classroom curriculum (“why do they play so much?”), wondered why their children didn’t have homework, and were concerned about academic skills such as knowing the letters of the alphabet and being able to write, and about why their children weren’t being taught more English. Their concerns were fueled by their desire for their children to be successful in school.

In spite of living in New York City, the families were aware of the dominance of English-only language ideologies (Crawford, 2004). One mother said, “*Mi tia me dice que mi hija tiene que saber todas las letras y los números en English cuando entre a kinder, porque si no la van a poner con los niños con problemas*”



(My aunt says that my daughter needs to know all her letters and numbers in English when she goes to kindergarten because if not they will put her with the children with problems).

The families' views on school and the role of language instruction drew on their own experiences of traditional teaching practices, of children sitting at desks learning from the teacher. At the same time, the families spoke highly of their experiences at Head Start; they loved the teachers, who they felt treated their children well, and they recognized that their children loved school. The families felt at home at the school and were glad that they could communicate with the teachers. In fact, many returned to Head Start even after their children had moved on, in order to ask for help with their children's schooling. In addition, families were pleased that their children were maintaining Spanish.

Interviews with the teachers offered a nuanced perspective. They were able to articulate the struggle between their beliefs and knowledge as teachers and their experiences as mothers who could identify with the families' questions and concerns. Teachers Massiel and Viviana embraced the school's curriculum and language philosophy. They wanted every child to be able to communicate in whatever way they felt most comfortable. They saw how the children developed through play and felt that play offered opportunities for every child to engage in the classroom at their own level and at their own pace.

Do you remember Estrella at the beginning of the year, she said nothing, her mom even laughed at us when we talked to her about how quiet she was in the classroom. But look, slowly, she started pointing and saying "this" "that," "I want to play there," and now, look at her, she is running the classroom. Before (making worried face), I was worried about her going to kindergarten and what the teachers there would say, but now, pshaw, she will be fine, more than fine, they will have their hands full trying to keep up with her. Even in English, she is doing well, both in English and Spanish, she is talking so much, she just hides the English from us, I hear her talking to Miss Joy [volunteer in classroom] in English, but she stops and gives me that look [opens eyes wide], ha, ha, yes, the teachers will have their hands full. (Interview with Massiel, March 2011, translated from Spanish)

For the teachers, language was the vehicle to help the children develop social skills, ways to express themselves and to advocate for themselves. While they saw bilingualism as an advantage and something to strive for, in practice they were more concerned with each child's socio-emotional well-being and ability to use language to communicate. The teachers fostered the children's existing

language practices, but were also keenly aware of the challenges the children would face in schools and in society if they were not able to speak English. They often used the phrase “*la realidad es que*” (the truth/reality is) as they struggled between the theoretical ideals of bilingual education and bilingualism and what they perceived to be the realities of the U.S., in particular discrimination against Spanish speakers. The teachers’ language ideologies drew on their own experiences as Spanish-speaking immigrants and as mothers of children who spoke only Spanish when they entered school.

When I asked the teachers how they made choices about which language to speak and why, their answers always came back to individual children and their needs.

*A veces uno quiere hablar en español y a veces en inglés. ¿Tu me entiendes? Si estoy hablando de los billes, o taxes, o cosas como mas cosas de la vida, entonces lo hablamos en inglés, pero si estamos hablando de los sentimientos, de las cosas de adentro, de cosas que uno quiere hablar con su mami, entonces, lo que me sale es hablar en español. Yo veo eso con mis hijos, casi siempre hablan en inglés, pero cuando algo les está pasando en el corazón, entonces, vienen, “Mami, I want to talk in Spanish” y entonces yo se que es algo serio y necesitan su mami. (Sometimes you want to talk in Spanish and sometimes in English. Do you understand? If I am talking about bills, or taxes, or things that are more like daily life stuff, then we talk in English, but if we are talking about feelings or intimate things that you want to talk about with your mom, then what comes out is Spanish. I see that my own children usually speak in English, but when something is happening in their heart, then they say “Mommy, I want to talk in Spanish” and then I know it’s something serious and they need their mom.)*

(Interview with Massiel, December 2010)

Massiel saw translanguaging as an integral part of her own language practices. She and Viviana engaged in dynamic bilingualism in their interactions with their own children and families, so they were able to understand how the school-children moved back and forth between languages. Unlike Joan, whose language ideologies built on her philosophies around language and the mission of the school, the teachers drew on their personal experiences to shape their views of language and how they approached language in the classroom.

Similarly, Massiel and Viviana understood families’ concerns and questions about the play-based curriculum. In a conversation with the teachers, Massiel said, “In my country, school is desks and chairs, a chalkboard and a teacher standing in front talking, and I imagine that this is what a lot of

the parents think school is.” Viviana added, “Yes, so what we have to do is teach, show them, how the children are learning through play, you know, what is happening at the block area, family area... so they can see, yeah, language development, social skills, math skills.”

In this conversation, the teachers are illustrating what Dewey describes as the “contrast between traditional and progressive education” (1938/1997, p. 17). Traditional school is where teachers transmit existing information and knowledge to students to prepare them for future endeavors. Progressive education focuses on the importance of experiences that help students to learn and develop understanding and build knowledge, or to use experiences to make sense of existing information. Viviana highlights how children are acquiring skills through their play; however, as she states, it is less obvious than when a teacher is standing in front of the class engaging in direct instruction.

The curricular practices at Head Start embraced many of the principles that Dewey (1938/1997) puts forth as being key to progressive education: learning experiences, drawing on children’s prior knowledge, the importance of context, the role of cooperation in teaching children social skills, the importance of choice, and the role of the teacher to support and scaffold learning experiences.

In her book *I Learn from Children*, Caroline Pratt (1948/1990) describes her development as a teacher, rejecting traditional schools and focusing on what she learned from her interactions and observations with children. She asks, “Was it unreasonable to try to fit the school to the child, rather than—as we were doing with indifferent success—fitting the child to the school?” (p. 8). Over sixty years later, these words still resonate with early childhood educators who attempt to create classroom spaces that are child-centered in the midst of high stakes testing, mandated standards, and core curricula.

In this Head Start school, the children, their language practices, and their interests guided the daily activities in the classroom. Every visit to the classroom was unpredictable—the children might be at a Michael Jackson concert (Axelrod, 2014b), discussing why a snowman melted in the rain, creating books about butterflies in the shape of butterflies, figuring out why mixing all the colors created brown, determining how many letter “a” magnets were needed for everybody’s name in the class, or discussing why it was important to be bilingual. It is difficult to imagine how standardized curricula would foster the richness of the conversations and play that occurred in this classroom. Children were given the time and space to play and learn in ways that allowed them to draw from their full linguistic repertoire and build upon their existing language skills.

The flexible and child-centered curriculum gave the children opportunities to interact with each other and learn from each other, highlighting the role and importance of peer interactions in development. This interaction perhaps best explains children's view of their roles in the classroom.

Javier: I am the teacher.

Estrella: *No, tu no eres la teacher.* (No, you aren't the teacher.)

Javier: *Si, yo soy el maestro.* (Yes, I am the teacher.)

Estrella: Noooooooooo [points to the classroom teacher].

Soraya: We can all be the teachers.

Javier: Yeah, like they be the big teachers and we can be the other teachers.

Soraya: Yeah, I can teach you something.

Javier: Me too, I can teach you something.

Estrella: *Yo soy maestra también.* (I am a teacher too.)

Javier: Yeah, we all is teachers in [this] room.

The children in this classroom saw themselves as capable beings who had knowledge and skills to offer and contribute to the learning of others. They embraced their classroom experiences, which gave them the confidence, even as 4-year-olds, that they could be teachers as well as learners.

Classrooms under current education policy have shifted back to the traditional education that Dewey describes (Genishi & Dyson, 2012; Nicolopoulou, 2010), where teachers are the possessors of knowledge and children are the recipients. There is little room for creativity, play, and non-standard language practices, given the emphasis on subject matter and order.

What if schools embraced progressive education, as this Head Start program does? Dewey argues that traditional education and progressive education do not need to be set up in opposition to each other; rather, the principles of progressive education can be the means through which to achieve the goals of traditional education. Viviana alludes to this when she talks about showing families how children learn and develop important academic skills through play.

Vivian Paley (2005) writes that play is a child's work and her vivid descriptions of children's play highlight its complexity as well as the richness of what it offers children. Her writing, similar to the descriptions of the practices in this classroom, foreground the children, their words, their actions, and what they are learning through play. In the same way, education policy could highlight practices that move the child to the center, focusing on the child's needs and context, and then think about how to develop curricula that builds on these practices. We must find a way to honor and recognize what children bring, so that they can in turn leverage their resources, prior knowledge, and language practices to support their learning and feel like they "all is teachers."

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# Holding Space for Progressive Practice

*Abbe Futterman, Dyanthe Spielberg, Cecelia Traugh*

In the early '90s in New York City, there was a great deal of interest in establishing small schools within the public system. Inspired by Central Park East and its founder, Debbie Meier, these schools were often guided by progressive, child-centered values and predicated on the belief that children would be better known and educated in small settings in which close relationships could be more readily developed (Bensman, 2000). Teachers and parents on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, at the time a largely Hispanic and low-income neighborhood, founded the Neighborhood School in 1991 and the Earth School a year later. They are the focus of this paper.

One of the ways the teachers and leaders at some of these small schools maintain their progressive outlooks and practices today is through the use of descriptive inquiry processes (Himley & Carini, 2000). In descriptive inquiry, teachers, parents, or school leaders make a presentation to their colleagues or peers that is shaped around a focus question that they are interested in exploring. For example, in order to better understand a child, a teacher may include descriptive material based on her practice, knowledge of the child, and work samples. Afterward, the chair of the group provides a brief restatement of the ideas generated by the presentation. Then the group responds, first with informational questions and next with ideas aimed at responding to the original focus question.

The text that follows began as an oral presentation at *The Schools We Want*, a symposium celebrating the inauguration of Bank Street College of Education President Shael Polakow-Suransky on October 17, 2015. Abbe Futterman, the principal of the Earth School, and Dyanthe Spielberg, the principal of the Neighborhood School, used the review of practice, a component of the descriptive inquiry process, to share their practices around maintaining an educational space that is broad in scope and grounded in progressive values. The two principals told how they learned to push back against the contextual forces that narrow children's learning and teachers' work. The focus question of this review was: What strategies do you hear these principals using to hold space for the progressive practices of teachers and leaders in their schools? The chair for the review was Cecelia Traugh, dean of the graduate faculty at Bank Street and a long-time consultant to the schools.



For this written version of the review, the principals' presentations are offered in full, and readers are encouraged to respond to the focus question themselves after reading the text. As the chair of the review, Traugh closes the paper with a brief discussion of the ideas and questions raised by the work that Futterman and Spielberg describe.

### **Abbe Futterman, Principal, The Earth School**

The Earth School is an ecological institute with a progressive approach and collaborative governance structure. It now has 340 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 in 14 mixed-age classrooms. The student population is 13% Black, 35% Hispanic, 37% White, 7% Asian, and 8% multiracial. Six percent are English language learners and 23% are students with disabilities. Forty-six percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch under Title 1.

I've organized my comments around three key ideas about sustaining progressive education in a public school setting.

### **First, collaboration with parents as key stakeholders in schools**

This idea embodies both a progressive value and a strategy for pushing back against a narrowing system. From our founding in 1992, we have held a belief in the importance of a broad view of parent involvement—from volunteering in a child's classroom or chaperoning a field trip to sitting on the School Leadership Team or on a teacher hiring committee. We initially wanted parent collaboration because we believed that constituencies closest to children should be decision-makers and because we felt that it would increase congruence between home and school and assure that parents would be “happy customers” as a result of understanding the school's progressive practices. But we soon learned that parents were also our allies in the perpetual battle for funding and space and for getting around stifling policies and regulations from local, state, and federal education departments as well as the teachers union.

In the early days of the school, after an election among three tiny progressive schools in District 1, our parents made up five-eighths of the local school board. We had some very fierce fighters. We fought and won battles for permitting parents to enter the building for drop-off and pick-up, against testing in second grade, for space in the building (which was also being used as headquarters and storage for School Safety), and more. We walked—and occasionally crossed—the line of civil behavior and used hardline tactics that sometimes severed relationships with district administrators,

but our actions also kept our school and its progressive vision alive. Banners were flown, tears were shed, expletives were exchanged, fax machines were clogged, favors were called in, and tomatoes were thrown.

Some of these tactics do not work nowadays, but we were also doing something that does work and that continues in our schools today: We were building a culture where parents and educators have opportunities to sit side by side to engage in conversations about the work of schools in order to closely consider aspects of teaching and learning—not unlike the review that we are doing here today. We expressed opinions and grappled with issues and because of this, we now have an informed base of parents and educators who are ready to speak and to act when their consciences dictate, by opting out of tests, participating in demonstrations, serving on the Community Education Council, and standing up in public meetings for our principles when conflict occurs within the school community. It is Democracy 101, but it doesn't happen in schools without intention.

## **Second, keeping a full picture of learning and the learner**

A second key aspect of holding space for our progressive values, which overlaps in important ways with collaboration with parents, is the diligence with which we strive to keep in front of us at all times a full and complex picture of the student. Resisting the tendency to simplify the complex complicated work of teaching and learning flies in the face of most institutionalized ways of seeing children, teachers, and schools. We forego the easiness of using labels, scores, and other blanket categorizations of students and their growth. We favor lengthy descriptions and extensive documentation of observations and evidence, not just about academic learning, but about many other areas of development. Here are some examples:

- Teachers write long narrative reports that include descriptions of student strengths, interests, social development, and approaches to learning tasks. We are curious about much more than the simple degree to which students “succeed” or what they “master.” Telling parents about a child’s strengths and interests may seem unnecessary, but we have an abiding belief that building on those aspects allows us to meet children on their own terms. They provide insights and open possibilities that are shut down by a focus on deficits and unattained proficiencies.
- In support team and pupil personnel team meetings, where teachers present students about whom they have concerns or who present challenges, we always begin with strengths, interests, and “whole student” information. Even in our casual conversations, it is what we turn to when we feel stuck. Being descriptive when articulating the hills and valleys

of a young person's life in school is an important way that we work to respect each child's uniqueness and to avoid judgments that may harm, pigeonhole, or blind.

### **Third, entering the contested areas of teacher evaluation: PROSE and learning domains**

Here's an example of how we are trying to hold space for the schools we want that is unfolding right now. I'll start with a bit of background.

In the last decade, as education departments around the country have become more deft at using standardized tests to rate students, schools, teachers, and principals, we have needed to devote a great deal of time and energy to shielding ourselves from the damaging effects of those tests. This constant drain on our energy is compounded by the strain of knowing that our high-quality, labor-intensive authentic assessment work is completely disregarded by those who govern us. Despite the dearth of support, we have persevered in our practices of both knowing children through their strengths and interests and through close observation and collaborative inquiry and of writing narrative reports.

About three and a half years ago, a teacher evaluation system that incorporates principal observations and rubrics was announced in New York City. Before long, we were being trained in the intricacies of the Annual Professional Performance Review system, a complex ratio of measures of teacher practice, as scored using the Danielson Framework for Teaching (which Dyanthe will describe below), and measures of student learning, as indicated by state and local metrics (standardized test scores). These initiatives met the eligibility guidelines for the federal Race to the Top grant monies requiring that student learning outcomes be part of a teacher's evaluation. Most teacher evaluation systems are based on the flawed premise that the only real evidence of great teaching practice is in how kids do on standardized tests of literacy and math.

We were mainly concerned about the mandated measures of student learning and wondered whether they would create both a system-wide disincentive to work with "difficult-to-teach" students and an even greater focus on test scores and test prep. We were also concerned about how they would impact curriculum and teaching. In the end, we did not believe it would result in accurate or formative assessments of teachers.

Simultaneously, with the increased use of state tests influenced by the Common Core, the opt-out movement was taking hold in many schools. Media exposure of cheating scandals, poor test design, and the arbitrary manipulation of rating thresholds bolstered public awareness of the testing industry's shortfalls. Protections were put in place to mandate that multiple measures be used to make important decisions about students, such as those regarding grade promotion. However, test results would still be used to rate teachers, and those results would always trump principals' observations and assessment of a teacher's practice.

In New York City, the 2014 teachers' contract included a new provision called PROSE (Progressive Redesign Opportunity for Schools of Excellence), a joint venture between the unions and the NYC Department of Education (DOE). PROSE purports to support innovations by enabling schools that have a demonstrated record of effective school leadership, collaboration, and trust to implement innovative practices outside of existing rules.

A group of six progressive elementary schools, all with a long history of collaboration and of shared practices, was able to come together quickly to propose an innovation that would modify the teacher evaluation system so that teachers were rated according to student growth as measured by qualitative documentation, work samples, and other authentic assessments, rather than by standardized test results.

However, we kept returning to the same dilemma: how not to penalize teachers for their work with challenging students, such as those in crisis, if—as can happen—those students fail to make significant academic progress despite brilliant teaching practice and outstanding teacher efforts. Remember, according to the Annual Professional Performance Review system, the quality of teacher practice and effort don't count in evaluating student learning outcomes. Again, we found our way by maintaining a broad view of students, teaching, and learning. Kohn (2004) writes, “perhaps the question, ‘How do we know if education has been successful?’ shouldn't be posed until we have asked what it's supposed to be successful at” (p.2). We held a series of meetings asking our faculty, school leadership team, and parents, “What does it mean to be well educated at the Earth School?” and organized a list of learning domains based on the responses. When this list is used to judge a child's progress, a student who may not seem to have made enough progress in math, for example, may be shown to have grown in significant ways in equally important non-academic areas. When teaching outcomes include children's progress across learning domains such as connecting with adults and peers or being aware of one's feelings, the effects of great teaching become apparent.

Using authentic assessment in lieu of standardized test scores in the teacher evaluation system has not been approved yet. Nevertheless, we are continuing to consider ways to move this work forward.

## **Dyanthe Spielberg, Principal, the Neighborhood School (TNS)**

The Neighborhood School was designed to meet an expressed need for a progressive approach to educating the children of its local community. At present it has 306 students from pre-kindergarten through grade 5 in 14 classrooms. The student population is 15% Black, 32% Hispanic, 44% White, and 9% Asian. Four percent are English language learners and 29% are students with disabilities.

I have organized my thoughts for this review according to:

- ways that the DOE has made openings, through PROSE, that broadened the parameters of existing requirements;
- ways that we have made openings within DOE structures/mandates; and
- ways that we simply “buck the system” (which we use the least).

Most of this review speaks about the work of educators. However, when we push against the system, it is also with the force of our most powerful allies, our parents, who are equally invested in the progressive values of our school.

A big part of my job as a leader is interpreting the work that we do at TNS in ways that makes sense to the DOE. All efforts to broaden DOE mandates are dangerous to various degrees, and speaking frankly about them with people outside our relatively small group of progressive public schools feels risky. My approach in dealing with the DOE is to share the details of our work as little as possible, and if the DOE, using their metrics—quality reviews, school snapshots, and parent surveys—rate our work as “effective,” we can continue to do what we want.

At TNS, policies and practices are formed collaboratively and dynamically to provide a cohesive, unified, thoughtful environment for children. We are self-reflective and reevaluate our policies periodically in an effort to meet the needs of our children and ever-evolving community. Our staff has been coming together for professional development after school each week since we began, although I don’t think we called it that then. We approach professional development as inquiry: It is emergent and therefore not linear. Our professional development committee—made up of me, teachers and frequently Cecelia (Traugh)—meets regularly to reflect on our work and plan next

steps. The process is constantly evolving in response to students' changing needs and interests, parental and community interests and concerns, and teachers' priorities. As a rule, inquiry is messy and often uncomfortable; it is another example of where we broaden our expectations for teachers.

## **Student portfolios**

This fall, the staff has been rethinking the place of portfolios in our school. Unlike DOE portfolios, ours are collections of student work, selected by students and teachers; they are not used for promotional purposes. Our portfolios are not created at the end of the year, but on an ongoing basis, beginning in Pre-K. Their audience is not the superintendent of schools, but rather the student, the teacher, and the family. Our inquiry has led us to consider the kind of work that goes into a student portfolio.

In looking through old collections of work from our former students, we were most struck by those pieces that originated fully from the child. They revealed so much more of the student than pieces that came from class sets or worksheets. I'm not talking about work that children selected that was based on certain criteria or a rubric. I'm talking about work that children have created that is based on their own inquiry and exploration: both project work (either the work itself or photos of it), encompassing a range of subjects, and work that targets specific areas like math, reading, and writing but which actually encompasses a large range of disciplines as well. For example, a writing sample can speak to a child's understandings of several subjects simultaneously and even to things we don't normally think to look for, such as a child's body awareness, motor skills, and visual and auditory perceptions. If we value this data most, we need to ask where opportunities for student voice and choice come into the curriculum. How do we structure our day and week to allow time for children to explore their own interests? How do we make this measurable according to the DOE's standards?

## **The descriptive review process**

The descriptive review process is a structure used for looking and thinking that reminds us to maintain a broad lens. The process not only expands how we see one child, but profoundly changes the culture by which teachers think about and see all children and their work. We devote our six professional development half-days to reviews in which teachers present areas of their practice, pieces of student work, or children. In addition, we structure our student study team process as a review, albeit loosely. Teachers describe the whole child at these meetings and don't jump

immediately to the child's challenges and struggles (although those are, of course, the reason that the teacher is presenting the child to the group).

## **The design your own assessment project**

For many years now, Cecelia has worked with a group of progressive schools that has met on a monthly basis. One aspect of that work was the Design Your Own Assessment (DYO) project (2006), a DOE option our schools used to create a way of documenting the process of looking at student work. Through this effort, we developed a tool we still use today. We have always followed a descriptive review structure to study children and children's work, and the DYO project was an opportunity to use that approach to meet DOE requirements. The DYO work has included teachers, but most recently only principals have participated in it.

In October I presented a part of my practice, the teacher observation cycle, for review. My question for those at the review was: How can the observation process generate an ongoing reciprocal conversation and foster teacher growth?

One aspect of my conversation with teachers is that I use a DOE-mandated evaluative tool and process for my own purposes. However, in the past two years, I have found my efforts to combine my ideas with those of the DOE to be clunky, disjointed, and not reflective of teachers' work and growth. The review illuminated this in a way that was uncomfortable and a little frustrating. It also raised questions about the relationship between professional development and evaluation. Is it possible to turn an evaluative process, one with very high stakes attached to it, into professional development?

Through the review, I realized that one value I hold in this work is teaching teachers to reflect. Bearing this in mind, I have reshaped our observation process in three important ways. First, I share the low-inference notes from my observations with teachers and give teachers a place in the notes to record their own thoughts. Second, I document our debrief conversation and include their voice in the final write-up. Finally, documenting what the teacher did as a result of our conversations creates a thread that will become part of our work for the year. I haven't put any of this into action yet, but I anticipate the process will continue to evolve as the year unfolds. Moreover, I am doing this review again with teachers in December, which I am certain will broaden my thinking in new ways.



## **The PROSE program at TNS**

As Abbe described, the PROSE program was established as part of the new contract between the teacher's union, the Counsel of School Supervisors and Administrators, and the Department of Education. Not surprisingly, given the progressive and independent nature of the six schools that submitted the joint PROSE proposal, our initiative looked different in each of them. For TNS, PROSE facilitated our school-wide inquiry last year: What is descriptive work and how can it help me? Within the larger school inquiry, we formed small teacher inquiry groups, organized according to how many years of experience the group members had in the classroom. Teachers selected six focus students based on a question about their own practice. Throughout the year, teachers met with their inquiry group to review documentation and rethink children, teaching practices, and, in some cases, their initial inquiry question. At the end of the year, teachers chose one child and presented the story of the pivotal decisions that they had made based on their documentation and what they had observed in their classroom. In June, each teacher presented her findings to her inquiry group. Teachers were evaluated on their ability to study children's work; their final evaluation was based on a rubric for inquiry created by Cecelia, the teachers, and me that evaluated their inquiry process.

For TNS, PROSE became a means to build our school and our capacities and to affirm processes that grew our practice. The school-wide inquiry pushed us to do what we think is best for children. For example, because we believe that revising goals and thinking about children is evidence of good teaching, teachers did not set three end-of-year goals for their six students in October, even though the PROSE guidelines required that. Similarly, PROSE may look different this year because we want to remain open and responsive to our students. However, we will continue to use the descriptive review process to guide our thinking because it gets to the crux of work that is fundamental for maintaining our broad, progressive stance about children and teaching.

## **Cecelia Traugh, Dean, Graduate School, Bank Street College**

Both Abbe Futterman and Dyanthe Spielberg name the core values that guide their work and push for an expansion of space, not a narrowing or standardization of space. Their presentations illustrate how progressive practice is intentionally value based. Here are five values I see at work in their schools.

## **Children at the center**

Children in their complexity are at the center of the work of these schools. Teachers, leaders, and parents focus on children's strengths and deep interests. The schools' approaches to assessment, especially the use of portfolios, illumine student thinking, learning, and engagement with curriculum.

## **A spirit of inquiry**

The spirit of inquiry is a key value that forms a basis for the space-making work of these schools. The power of description and descriptive inquiry as the ground for knowledge-making is recognized as a means to keep children at the center of the work of the school. The descriptive review process builds communities in which teachers are engaged in ongoing conversations about learning and teaching. Using inquiry to shape the professional development practices of these schools allows teachers' questions about their students to prime their own learning and growth in a way that respects their interests and capacities.

## **Community**

Communities are also valued and are part of the long-term goals of these schools. Teachers, leaders, and sometimes parents form inquiry groups within the school. An ongoing focus of the work is how to better include a wide range of children as full participants in the classroom community. The schools and their leaders also form networks to build larger communities of practice. Having been part of the learning communities developed within these small schools and a participant in the networks of the schools and their leaders, I know that these collaborations can help break down the isolation often experienced by educators in large systems.

## **Advocacy**

Advocacy is a process valued by these schools. From the beginning, parents and teachers have spoken out and stood up for their schools and the kind of education they aim to provide. This advocacy is possible because there is ongoing conversation and learning among all the critical community members, particularly parents. As the schools navigate the sometimes difficult waters of the NYC DOE, parents are viewed as allies of the teachers who work with their children and allies of the schools as a whole.

## Translation

The principals of both schools have underlined that translation is a necessary and valuable skill. They translate DOE policy into a form that can be understood by parents and by teachers, and they translate the ideas and practices of the school into language that can be understood by parents and the DOE. Recognizing that they are part of a much larger system and that there are reasons for policies, leaders must find and translate the intent of these policies into an opening for identifying ways to use the system to the schools' benefit.

Finally, I will argue that using a value base as a means of holding and expanding space for progressive practice must become a habit of mind for leaders, teachers, and parents. These schools have done this by being explicit about core values, taking an inquiry stance toward the work of education, and developing the skill of translation. They have created networks and communities that include parents, other schools and their leaders, and schools of education. These are just some of the lessons to be learned from these small schools as they use inquiry processes to support progressive education within the public system.

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**Abbe Futterman** was a founding teacher at The Earth School, in New York City, where she currently serves as principal. She taught science for many years during which time she helped found The Fifth Street Farm, a 2,400 square foot organic garden on the school's roof. She is an alumna of Bank Street College's Teacher Education and Educational Leadership programs. Abbe lives in Brooklyn with her two daughters, Elsabet and Mirette.



**Dyanthe Spielberg** is principal of The Neighborhood School. In addition to her on-going work to build staff capacity around descriptive processes such as reviews of practices, children, and children's work, this year she has focused on exploring issues of race, racism, and racial justice with staff. Dyanthe is a graduate of Bank Street's Leadership for Educational Change program. She lives in Chelsea with her husband and daughter.



**Cecelia Traugh** is dean of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College. Her current work includes school-wide inquiry groups in small schools across Manhattan and Brooklyn. These inquiry groups use the descriptive processes developed at the Prospect Center in North Bennington, Vermont to investigate issues important to the inclusive education of all children and the ongoing development of the schools themselves.

# Across Classrooms: School Quality Reviews as a Progressive Educational Policy

*Doug Knecht, Nancy Gannon, and Carolyn Yaffe*

## Introduction

Educators, politicians, and citizens have been embroiled in debate about how to hold schools accountable for the type of learning experiences all children deserve. Despite decades of improvement efforts and a consistent tightening of policy screws, students across districts and schools continue to have extremely uneven classroom experiences, and a shared understanding of educational quality remains elusive. The intent of No Child Left Behind was to shine a spotlight on inequalities in outcomes and incentivize systems to do better through rewards and consequences. However, the narrow lens of test scores is insufficient and has been shown to result in perverse behaviors (Payne-Tsoupros, 2010; Vogell, 2011). Our own experience has demonstrated to us that this narrow approach to accountability can result in classrooms of lower quality, where intensive pressure around test scores on educators yields classrooms filled with test prep activities. These are schools in which the experiences of children and teachers are not prioritized and student voice is irrelevant. In the past few years, a growing number of people have been questioning the place of high-stakes testing in educational accountability (Strauss, 2015). In some parts of the country, the “opt out” movement has grown to include a significant proportion of the student body in the grades given standardized tests in elementary and middle schools; for example, in New York 20% of families across the state refused to allow their children to sit for the tests in 2015 (Harris, 2015).

While recent governmental action at the federal level has acknowledged this public discontent with the current system, establishing guidelines to avoid “overtesting” (King, 2016), we need a coherent approach to accountability that sheds more light on the educational causes of inequitable outcomes and illuminates a path toward creating higher- quality learning experiences for all students. In order to address disturbing variations in student learning experiences across classrooms, education leaders must look toward accountability processes that are more progressive, such as a school quality review (QR). QRs can more readily embody central principles of progressive education by modeling the kind of critical and constructivist approach in school leadership that we expect to see teachers use in classrooms. In this way and others, when done well, the QR fosters a progressive form of accountability in which a passive, transmission, or “banking” concept of education (Freire,

1970) is replaced by an approach that privileges the collective and collaborative construction of understanding, the honoring of both student and educator experience and voice, and the incorporation of multiple stakeholders, including families, in a more transparent and democratic process regarding high-stakes decisions. It is our deep belief that an educational accountability system with elements like these at its core is much better positioned to strengthen the positive impact of public schools and districts on our larger society. Without equity of quality learning experiences across classrooms, the goal of social justice through education will remain unachieved.

Darling-Hammond, Wilhoit, and Pittenger (2014) include school QRs in their description of a new paradigm of accountability. Similarly, Rothstein, Jacobsen, and Wilder (2008) culminate their seminal text on accountability with a model that has school inspections at its core. Various educational policy and support organizations have agreed with the potential power of school QRs to provide an improved accountability approach (Neill, 2010; Smarick, 2016).

School QR policies have been rigorously road-tested since 1992, when England launched its school inspection process (Jerald, 2012). Other countries followed suit, from the Netherlands to Singapore to New Zealand, using an inspection system to assess school quality (Whitby, 2010). In the United States, various state education departments, including those in Massachusetts, Ohio, and New York, have employed a diagnostic or QR process. New York City, the largest district in the country, implemented its first qualitative reviews with a process called the Performance Assessment in Schools System-wide: Essential Elements of Exemplary Schools (PASS) in 1996. After that process faded, almost a decade later the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) engaged an English company, Cambridge Education, to help reconstruct a school inspection process. Since 2006 NYCDOE's school QRs have served as the counterpoint to the quantitative student and survey outcomes in its accountability model. Along the way, the QR policy and process have evolved, becoming owned and implemented internally by the NYCDOE. As an indicator of the strength of this work, the New York State Department of Education consulted with the NYCDOE school quality team as it launched a similar accountability policy in 2012, called the Diagnostic Tool for School and District Effectiveness.

As leaders of the QR for the NYCDOE from 2010 to 2015, the authors of this paper agree with past and current thinking that school inspections are necessary for a more developmentally meaningful and student-centered educational accountability approach.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, there is evidence that school inspections can drive change processes that focus on self-reflection and capacity building (Gustafsson et al., 2015). This paper will focus on other key advantages of investing in a QR process, as well as on a set of challenges and considerations gleaned from our involvement with implementing it on a large scale. We will focus on how the QR, grounded in a progressive vision, can leverage student experiences across classrooms to foster and sustain change toward high-quality schooling for all children.

## **Advantages of a QR Process**

Districts and states lack firsthand knowledge and direct evidence about essential aspects of education within schools they oversee, such as school culture, including the quality of relationships between and level of expectations for students and adults; strength of leadership in visioning, setting goals, and leveraging a variety of data sources to improve practices; coherence of curriculum across grade levels and disciplines; beliefs about and approach to pedagogy; types and use of assessments; effectiveness of adult learning systems and teaming structures; impact of professional feedback to staff; and engagement of families and community partners. Although school surveys have become more commonplace, surfacing perspectives on the quality of these types of important aspects of schools, the results cannot reveal the rich, nuanced story of the lived experience of students and adults within a school community. And while some critics may deride these aspects of schooling as merely “inputs,” we ask: How can one feel secure about high-stakes accountability decisions made in the name of equity—including reallocating or increasing funds, changing school leadership and staffing, and closing a school—without first-hand qualitative data on the quality of education across classrooms?

Specifically, a QR process offers four critical components of effective accountability that cannot be easily achieved otherwise:

- A vision of “what good looks like”
- A path toward coherence across workstreams within a school

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions in this paper are solely those of the authors and are not meant to represent the thoughts of other past or current NYCDOE leaders of the QR process.



- A dialogue with the school community that creates levers of change through targeted strengths and areas for improvement
- A collection of data across schools for district leadership decision making about policies and resource use

Integrating these components into an accountability system can lead toward a more progressive set of policies and supports for students and educators across schools. We will use the story of New York City's QR to describe how.

**A Vision of What Good Looks Like.** The QR process is an articulation by system leadership of what good looks like at the school level. With the development of the QR in New York City, educational leaders shared a set of criteria that stated what was important and valued across the entire system of approximately 1,700 schools. Leadership planted a stake in the ground about what we believed all students deserved. This articulation is crucial when the use of hard data and cycles of political change often encourage public education systems to change their “theme.” A strong QR rubric and process provide a roadmap of quality, based in research and practice, that remains fairly consistent over time. The roadmap includes a clear instructional compass, defining the expectations we have for student learning experiences across classrooms. In New York City, our theory of action was simple: To impact what is happening across classrooms, one needs to focus energy on what is happening across classrooms. To this end, we built a rubric<sup>2</sup> that centered on curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, relating those three indicators of quality to the concept of an “instructional core” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). The quality of these instructional core indicators underpinned the QR work as a whole.

While the rubric provides indicators of quality in relation to each area of a school's work, it does not dictate or mandate a specific implementation strategy. Rather, it asks school communities to articulate their vision of pedagogy and demonstrate both how their work aligns to that vision and what the impact has been for student experience and outcomes. In fact, among the leaders of the QR work, we have had internal debates: *What if we visit a school that has a form of pedagogy that seems particularly repressive to students but which shows dramatic test score gains? Should we include stronger language in the QR rubric around our preferred pedagogical methods?* We decided instead to ensure that the QR process and rubric guard against this issue—in a way that testing-based accountability does not—by including measures around school culture and social-emotional well-being that require reviewers to examine

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2 As of the publication of this article, the current NYC DOE QR rubric and other related resources can be found at <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/review/default.htm>.

the quality of student experience and the equity of inputs and outcomes for students in a school community. We believe this idea is essential to the use of the QR as part of a thoughtful and robust accountability approach that does not prescribe a specific method for achieving positive experiences for all students. The QR process then becomes the vehicle for critical exploration of the impact of the practices that the school believes support student learning, as opposed to a tool for the imposition of any particular educational approach.

To gather data using the rubric, we developed a school review process that entails collecting evidence from classroom observations, reviews of documentation, and interviews with various constituents, including students, families, and partner organizations, allowing us to identify any patterns of the quality of learning across classrooms (see Figure 1). Again, we asked the school leadership to articulate how its community believed students and adults learned best. From there, we were able to begin constructing, together with constituents, a comprehensive picture of how the school was fulfilling its vision and mission based on those beliefs.

## Figure 1. Overview of the QR Process

### Sample Quality Review Schedule

#### In Advance

- School writes self-reflection, identifying goals and practices as they relate to indicators on the rubric
- Reviewer receives and analyzes school data and school self-reflection
- Reviewer formulates questions based on data

#### Day 1

- Reviewer and school administrators meet for a discussion of school context and an interview centered around rubric indicators, including beliefs around teaching and learning
- Reviewer meets with parent focus group
- Reviewer meets with larger student focus group
- Reviewer and leadership visit 3–4 classrooms and debrief throughout the walkthrough
- Reviewer observes teacher team in practice
- Reviewer and leadership meet to reflect on the day and identify any big questions/concerns/gaps

## Day 2

- Reviewer and leadership visit 3–4 additional classrooms and debrief throughout the walkthrough
- Reviewer meets with smaller student focus group to review student work artifacts
- Reviewer meets with union representation if requested
- Reviewer reflects and writes draft summary
- Reviewer meets with leadership and, using a protocol, shares preliminary outcomes; school leadership team responds and provides further evidence or clarification as desired
- Reviewer notes that final outcomes will be delivered in a report within 6-8 weeks

Concurrently, the rubric focused school leaders on the importance of research- and evidence-based practices, such as having teacher teams engaged in collaborative inquiry to review student work. We also used the QR rubric to strategically introduce new policies, such as establishing a teaching framework to elevate instructional practices and implementing the multiyear integration of the Common Core State Standards. While we acknowledged that some of these elements of the QR were perceived by school communities to be mandates around an approach to schooling, we did our best to convey why they were essential, and how there was still flexibility in implementation. Over time, although we tweaked our language and expectations, we maintained our vision of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as the critical instructional core and of the centrality of the school community's beliefs about learning and teaching.

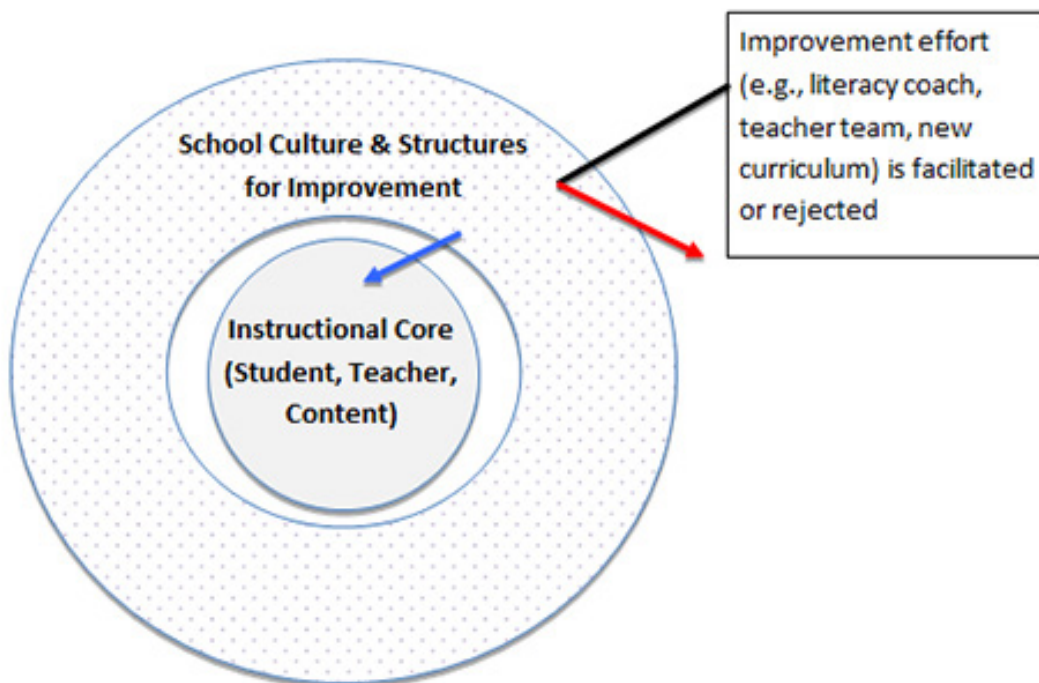
As a side note, our experience tells us that a QR process, while always based in research, should be developed within the context of a district as much as possible. Although some level of stability is essential to organize learning and capture data longitudinally, it takes input and refinement in partnership with stakeholders to build investment in the rubric as a meaningful school accountability and improvement tool.

**A Path Toward Coherence.** The QR rubric and process offer an unparalleled opportunity to foster coherence of highly complex and interrelated workstreams. In New York City, the QR served to identify the key strands of work in a school community and stretched school leaders to align these strands in support of student learning. When we first began reviewing schools, it was common to find leaders who would articulate goals and then show a budget that did not support those goals or who provided a set of observations in which teachers did not receive feedback related to the goals. It

was also common for reviewers to rate a school's professional development and assessment practices as "well developed," even though, in their classroom practice, teachers didn't demonstrate learnings from their professional development experience, and even though assessments didn't drive learning improvements.

As a result of observations like these, we revisited our framework and placed the instructional core within a ring we defined as *school culture and structures for improvement*<sup>3</sup> (see Figure 2). This was intended to indicate that (a) the ultimate impact of a school is in what students learn as a result of the interactions between teacher, student, and content, and (b) school culture and structures either facilitate or hinder improvements to this instructional core. For example, if the principal hires a literacy coach to improve pedagogy and student outcomes, the school's culture and structures (e.g., how teachers respond to a coach coming into their classrooms and reviewing literacy data with them in team meetings or whether time is provided for those activities) will either enable this investment to reap benefits to the instructional core or, like an immunity system, reject this attempt at improvement.

**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for the Quality Review**



3 This idea is based on the notion of school culture playing a buffering or facilitative role in school improvement efforts, which one of the authors, Doug Knecht, was exposed to during graduate coursework with Dr. Richard Elmore of Harvard Graduate School of Education in the spring of 2006. Staff at HGSE could not provide a published reference for this concept.

With this framework, we articulated the connections between individual rubric indicators (e.g., the budget, the structure for teacher collaborations, and professional development, which should all be clearly aligned to school goals for student learning). In addition, we illuminated how the three overarching aspects of a school community—a culture of high expectations and of student and family involvement; structures for the management of time, personnel, data, and other resources to improve supports and opportunities; and the instructional core itself—fit together and relate to one another. Through the QR process, the foremost message of the framework—that impact on student learning experiences across classrooms is at the center of a school’s work—reinforced this key principle of progressive education.

The QR rubric and associated professional learning were also refined to increase coherence of the policy. As an example, the indicator that measured the effectiveness of resource use at the school level was revised to more clearly require that student artifacts and teacher practices show evidence of the impact of the use of those resources.

**Levers of Change.** Even the most challenged schools have elements of promise: teachers who connect with students, a kind and inclusive climate, an art or music program that engages students, so that they come to school early or stay late. Too often, accountability policies demoralize school communities by confronting them with a litany of improvement items that obscure what the school does well and that lack a clear, high-leverage anchor to the school’s work. Just as meeting students where they are is a guiding principle of progressive education, acknowledging a school’s strengths is critical for motivating stakeholders to collaborate, build on those strengths, and realize improvements so that all students are supported in their learning.

The most valuable part of a QR for school leadership may be that it provides a prioritized, focused set of levers to improve the school’s instructional core. Improvement cannot occur simultaneously in all areas of need when a school is developing or worse, staving off chaos (Payne, 2008). Feedback must present targeted and individualized assessments for each school. In New York City, we moved towards offering no more than three areas of improvement for schools rated below the acceptable score of “proficient.” Similar to the findings of a study of British school inspections (McCrone, Coghlan, Wade, & Rudd, 2009), school leader surveys consistently demonstrated that they found the conversation and feedback during QRs to be a useful lever in shaping improvement with their school communities.

As the QR policy evolved, we saw that using the experiences students have across classrooms and providing targeted feedback toward systemic improvements that were rooted in a common vision of what good schooling looks like could impact school improvement efforts on a larger scale. In many ways, we worked to deliberately go beyond an evaluation stance and be a model for the kind of learning we wanted to see at all levels of the system. This included creating a set of formative alternative QRs. These were differentiated processes designed to align to the state of a given school's development. Schools performing well on a range of quantitative measures and past QRs experienced Peer Quality Reviews, in which a small team of educators, including other school leaders, visited the school for a day and used the QR rubric to provide feedback on an area of growth the host school identified. Schools assessed as “developing” on a QR (i.e., just below proficiency) were given a Developing QR the following year, a one-day visit facilitated by their school support network, typically a trusted partner. These schools then experienced a formal QR one year later, with the understanding that schools required more than a single year to foster the kind of improvement efforts needed to truly make a meaningful impact across classrooms. To keep the focus on learning and growth, the written reports and improvement plans for the alternative QRs were not made public, and there were no related accountability consequences for the schools in that year.

It is important to note that the idea for differentiated reviews came from our annual process of seeking input from various stakeholders throughout the system. A principal proposed the Peer QR criteria and policy. Later in the QR's development, a student activist organization, the Student Voice Collaborative, met with us and recommended we find a way to allow students to shadow a QR to improve student insight and input into the QR process. We agreed to create this opportunity for students to better understand how their schools were being evaluated, and two students published an article about their experience (Parham & McBroom, 2015).

**Data Across Schools.** In addition to offering a common vision for educational quality grounded in a progressive approach, another important advantage of the QR is that it provides district leaders a common foundation for professional learning, resource allocation, and school improvement. A defined set of criteria and a dataset based on those criteria afford a clear entry point into work with individual schools, with groups of schools within a district, and with those charged with supporting school improvement. The data from the thousands of New York City QRs over time strengthened the district-level conversation and helped ensure that important decisions were made based on data trends gathered on these visits.



For example, outcomes from the first years of the QRs indicated that over half the schools earning a proficient rating overall had scored below proficient on the quality of instruction. We shared this data with the school system at large and asked: Can we remain comfortable with this incongruity? How should we address this issue? The data also showed, as mentioned earlier, that professional development was often rated highly at schools with poor pedagogy. While one could make the case that some schools were in the process of improving their classroom practice through strong professional development and the QR captured this moment of growth, it was highly unlikely for that to be true for large numbers of schools, year in and year out. This data engendered conversations about long-held assumptions regarding the quality of adult learning and the role of school leaders in that work. It also fueled a policy decision to prioritize a handful of the indicators in the QR by giving twice as much weight in the scoring system to indicators focused on the instructional core, teacher teaming, and the use of resources by school leadership. No longer could a school surmount its instructional deficits in a QR simply by demonstrating that the adults in the school community were happy with the learning environment and opportunities *they* were afforded. The student learning experience accordingly remained the focal point of the adults' work.

We shared with the larger community of educators that during QRs the indicators assessing the quality of curricula and pedagogy were consistently rated the lowest, and then began providing a variety of professional learning experiences to build a more calibrated understanding across the system of what rigorous curricula and effective pedagogy look like. We also found and generated high-quality exemplars of curriculum and aligned assessments, which were shared on an open, online repository called the Common Core Library.<sup>4</sup>

## Implementation Challenges and Considerations

There were three central challenges we experienced during the evolution of the QR:

- Addressing the compliance mindset with which many educators approached the QR process
- Establishing the credibility of a qualitative assessment whose outcome was perceived in the field to be more related to the reviewer(s) assigned to a given school rather than to the quality of the schooling that was observed and documented through the process
- Balancing the various goals of the QR, which included providing detailed and useful feedback to the school community while simultaneously reporting out on school quality to other stakeholders, most notably parents

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4 Currently, the Common Core Library can be found at: <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/CommonCoreLibrary/default.htm>



In *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right*, Rothstein et al. (2008) quote Campbell's Law, which states that measures of social processes used for important decision making will be subject to corruptive pressures that distort the social processes they are intended to monitor. Despite the best intentions of the QR to elevate a shared instructional conversation, school communities often became subject to Campbell's Law. It was common for school leaders to approach the process with a compliance mentality; unfortunately, school support and supervisory staff frequently worked to "prepare" the community for a QR rather than making investments in sustainable planning practices that would yield positive outcomes for students beyond the QR experience. An analysis of NYCDOE's PASS review process from the 1990s yielded a similar insight: the work of school improvement can be overwhelmed by the press of accountability (Tobias & Miller, 1999). In our experience, the typical result of this compliance mindset was a dog and pony show: a set of superficial changes the school made and presented during the two- to three-day review. In the worst cases, large amounts of school time were spent on the preparation of voluminous binders of documents to be presented that had little effect on the QR rating, since the rubric and process required evidence from across classroom visits and interviews with constituents as the foundation for quality judgments.

In a connected challenge, both school leaders and quality reviewers asked for checklists of activities that, if completed, would lead to high levels of performance on the rubric. Although a key advantage of a QR process is the shared understanding of what good looks like, creating this shared understanding across a school district is a formidable undertaking. Linking high-stakes decisions to QR outcomes exacerbated these challenges and reduced the power of the QR as a formative tool for improvement. This insight was another motivation to create formative reviews, such as the Developing QR and Peer QR, which were intended to reduce corruptive pressures and focus on genuine school improvement.

Maintaining consistency of performance across reviewers, in terms of both rating on the rubric and adhering to review protocols, was another serious hurdle to establishing and maintaining system-wide investment in the QR as a fair and useful tool. There were more than 70 reviewers charged with facilitating these evaluations, who had varying degrees of desire to be involved in the process and of commitment to its value. Therefore, a great deal of reviewer training and performance management infrastructure needed to be put in place as a foundation for the work. Investment of both time and human resources is essential for the QR process to be powerful, and both can

be prohibitively high; thoughtful integration of this work with the right supervisory roles by the appropriate individuals is paramount.

To maximize resources and effectiveness, we learned that consistency is improved with a smaller, stable group of reviewers focused on sharpening their abilities to transform the low-inference observations they collected during reviews into shared norms and a common understanding of quality within the school community. In addition, QRs should be a primary aspect of instructional leaders' work, not a secondary responsibility, and it should be deeply connected to and inform other strands of their work, such as school supervision and support. We also learned that reviewers, like teachers and students, should be organized into small, cohesive groups that regularly examine and reflect on their work, their practice, and their experiences. We then consistently leveraged this learning to develop a common understanding of the QR rubric and processes among reviewers and others in the district working with and in schools. However, high turnover of education leaders, along with the changes that come with an election cycle, created hurdles in establishing a consistent reviewer group over any significant length of time.

One of the greatest challenges of using the QR as one of the two major tools of the district's accountability system was meeting the expectation that the evidence and outcomes from the process provided descriptions of a school's quality that were clear to both educators and noneducators. Like all professionals, in discussing their day-to-day work, educators use professional language that many inside and outside the system refer to as jargon, or "edu-speak." In New York City, the high bar for evidence for ratings meant that QR reports were typically too long and not easily understood by the general public. Over time, we began to envision ways of summarizing the key findings and producing more accessible versions of these more technical reports. Continued work needs to be done to find ways to address this particular challenge.

A final consideration touches on the power of listening to constituents and, related to this, continually working to tweak the language of the rubric and the process to maximize its usefulness across the system. The QR team held annual conferences with scores of stakeholders, from principals and reviewers to central office leaders and collective bargaining representatives, asking for feedback on the QR process and rubric. This was more than a political maneuver. As mentioned earlier, very good ideas flowed from these exchanges that improved the QR. In this way, we moved away from the intense debates we had in 2010 around the language in the QR rubric to the acceptance of the QR as a roadmap of strong practice just two years later. Without this level of investment in a more democratic approach to policy construction and refinement, the energy of

educators within the system would have continued to be spent on the arguments between the adults rather than on focusing on the quality of children's learning within our schools, across classrooms.

## Conclusion

Juxtaposing the evolution of the QR work in New York City with other qualitative review processes, we see that many of the challenges we faced—such as the struggle with interrater reliability—are common to all these efforts (Tobias & Miller, 1999). As mentioned earlier, both the findings of a study of the British school inspection system and our own analysis of survey data from principals indicated that the formative aspects of the review were the most powerful; this can be difficult to communicate in the public sharing of reports or to translate into data to inform district decisions. These common issues lead us to think that they are tensions that school district teams must continually manage and tend to, as opposed to issues that will yield to a definitive solution.

Despite the challenges, we strongly believe that the QR work in New York City has been instrumental in transforming the accountability conversation into a more nuanced one about how adults organize to improve the learning experiences of all students and how the entire district defines and measures what good schooling looks like. We are not suggesting that progressive educational practices will necessarily flourish through the implementation of a QR process. However, something like an inspection process is needed if we agree that schools and districts should be held accountable for reaching all learners in meaningful ways so that our public education system contributes to increased equity in our society. By shifting from a narrow view of high-stakes moments to a more progressive systems approach that focuses on a critical dialogue around beliefs about learning and on the impact that the efforts of adults within a school community have on student experience, districts and states can move beyond remote diagnosis and build stronger, more robust systems and structures that model reflective and constructive practices and engender continual improvement. In this way, a school system can realize its articulated vision for teaching and learning across classrooms, so that all students get the education they deserve.

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